

**THE STRANGE STORY**

*Of*  
**DR. JAMES BARRY**  
*Army Surgeon, Inspector-General of Hospitals,  
discovered on death to be a woman.*



**ISOBEL RAE**



## THE STRANGE STORY OF DR. JAMES BARRY

The story of Dr. James Barry must be one of the strangest in the annals of medical and military history. Dr. Barry was born in the 1790's and died in 1865 having attained the high rank of Inspector-General of Hospitals and having served with the Army for more than forty years as a surgeon. After Barry's death it was discovered that 'he' was a woman. There were even indications that Barry had given birth to a child when young. Miss Isobel Rae is the first author to have been given access by the War Office to the 'Barry Papers', and her book is an engrossing account of Barry's extraordinary career, told without conjecture or romanticising.

In it we read of the mystery surrounding Barry's birth and her early years, of her distinguished service overseas in many parts of the world, of her irritable contempt for authority in her sweeping reforms and up-to-date ideas—she was indeed even court-martialled on one occasion—and of the measures she was constantly driven to, to maintain her secret. Not least remarkable is the fact that she was probably the first woman in history to qualify as a doctor and to practise as a surgeon.

The peppery little figure, with dyed red hair, high-pitched voice and tiny white hands, absurd in her full-dress uniform with cockaded hat, huge sword and built-up heels, often to be seen carrying a small dog and attended by a towering black servant, emerges unforgettably from the pages of this astonishing book.



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Dr. James Barry.

*A miniature painted on ivory. Artist unknown.*

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DR JAMES BARRY

*Army Surgeon, Inspector-General of Hospitals,  
Discovered on death to be a Woman*

BY  
ISOBEL RAE



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## PREFACE

FOR close on a hundred years writers have been intrigued by the mystery of Inspector-General Dr James Barry. Was Barry, as rumour said, in fact a woman? And, if a woman, is it possible that she could have concealed her sex successfully through more than forty years of devoted service as an army surgeon? Was she then, also, the first woman M.D. in Britain?

These questions have been raised, but never answered. Barry has inspired two novels (*A Modern Sphinx*, 1881, by Colonel Rogers, and *Dr James Barry: Her Secret Story*, 1932, by the Misses Racster and Grove) and innumerable magazine articles, but no factual biography. This gap I have now been able to fill, and in the light of facts the old romantic figure of James Barry disappears. The temperamental, hysterical girl of high degree, who joined the Army Medical Service for love of an army surgeon, and who was protected in all her escapades by powerful, but unknown, authorities in high places, becomes instead the brilliant student, the dedicated doctor, the dauntless reformer of abuses; a different, but no less interesting character.

Now, more fortunate than previous writers on Barry, I have been allowed access by the War Office to the 'Barry Papers', hitherto not open to inspection by the public. All my predecessors believed that the 'Barry Papers' contained a post-mortem report which would definitely establish Barry's female sex, but this is not so. What they do contain is the statement of the charwoman who prepared Barry's body for burial. Staff-Surgeon-Major D. R. McKinnon, who had signed Barry's death certificate as a male (satisfied,



as he explained, of the identity of the body) put in writing the evidence this woman gave him, that Barry's body was that 'of a perfect female', and of one who had 'had a child when very young'. She gave proofs, which appear physiologically correct and irrefutable, for this statement, and I accept it as the final answer.

This biography contains no fiction, and I could not have undertaken the research involved in writing it without the willing response of all those whom I approached with enquiries. I owe grateful thanks to Brigadier J. S. K. Boyd, to my friends Sir Neil and Lady Hamilton Fairley, who encouraged me in my idea of taking up the task, and to Miss C. Mackenzie, who read the book in typescript.

To many London librarians I owe a deep debt of gratitude: Mr M. Davies, Librarian, Royal Army Medical College, Millbank; Dr F. N. L. Poynter, Librarian, Wellcome Medical Library; Mr D. H. Simpson, Librarian, Royal Empire Society; Mr F. A. Tubbs, Librarian, St Thomas's Hospital Medical School; Brigadier J. Stephenson, Librarian, Royal United Service Institution; Mr F. Reynolds, Deputy Superintendent of the British Museum Newspaper Library, and the staffs of the Public Record Office, the British Museum Reading Room, and the London Library.

In Edinburgh I have to thank Dr Corson, Deputy Librarian, University Library; Dr Douglas Guthrie, Lecturer on the History of Medicine, and the staff of the National Library for their help, and Mr M. C. Pottinger, Librarian of the Scottish Central Library, who, by putting me in touch with the Director of the Venezuelan National Library at Caracas, and with Dr Francis, Librarian, Osler Library, McGill University, Montreal, enabled me to obtain most important documents.

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I am also indebted to the *Manchester Guardian* for a photo copy of the issue of 21 August 1865, and to Mr John C. McCrindle of Glasgow for information supplementary to his late father's letter to the *Glasgow Herald* in December 1949.

The Royal Army Medical College, the Royal United Service Institution, and St Thomas's Hospital have kindly given me permission to quote from manuscripts in their possession.

ISOBEL RAE



## ILLUSTRATIONS

Dr James Barry. A miniature painted on ivory.  
Artist unknown.

*Frontispiece*

*By courtesy of the Cape Archives*

*Facing page*

Dr James Barry, Inspector-General of Hospitals.  
A sketch made in Corfu, 1852. Artist Unknown.

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*By courtesy of Lt-Gen. Sir Alexander Drummond, K.B.E., C.B.,  
Q.H.S., F.R.C.S., D.L.O., Director-General, Army Medical  
Services, and of the Commandant of the Royal Army Medical  
College*

Dr James Barry, aged about 70, shortly before her  
death.

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*By courtesy of Lt-Gen. Sir Alexander Drummond, K.B.E., C.B.,  
Q.H.S., F.R.C.S., D.L.O., Director-General, Army Medical  
Services, and of the Commandant of the Royal Army Medical  
College*



## THE STRANGE STORY OF DR JAMES BARRY

### I

'A STRANGE STORY', excerpt from the *Manchester Guardian* of 21 August 1865:

An incident is just now being discussed in military circles so extraordinary that, were not the truth capable of being vouched for by official authority, the narration would certainly be deemed absolutely incredible. Our officers quartered at the Cape between 15 and 20 years ago may remember a certain Dr Barry attached to the medical staff there, and enjoying a reputation for considerable skill in his profession, especially for firmness, decision and rapidity in difficult operations. This gentleman had entered the army in 1813, had passed, of course, through the grades of assistant surgeon and surgeon in various regiments, and had served as such in various quarters of the globe. His professional acquirements had procured for him promotion to the staff at the Cape. About 1840 he became promoted to be medical inspector, and was transferred to Malta. He proceeded from Malta to Corfu where he was quartered for many years. . . . He there died about a month ago, and upon his death was discovered to be a woman. The motives that occasioned, and the time when commenced this singular deception are both shrouded in mystery. But thus it stands as an indubitable fact, that a woman was for 40 years an officer in the British service, and fought one duel and had sought many more, had pursued a legitimate medical education, and received a regular diploma, and had acquired almost a celebrity for skill as a surgical operator.



That, in brief, is the story of Dr James Barry, and, with variations, that is the story which, for nearly a hundred years, has appeared in various magazine articles and novels about Barry. Details about Dr Barry's education and military service, and particulars of her early years are rarely given, and so it seemed to me that, in order to draw a true picture of this extraordinary character, it would be wise to abandon all second-hand information and go straight to the sources, to the Colonial Office and War Office documents, for instance—and, first and foremost, to try to discover who James Barry really was.

She was frank about her place of birth, London, but extremely reticent about the date. In her later years she was apt to boast that she had 'entered the army as a medical officer under the age of 14', and, in 1843, in an official document, she actually gave the date of her birth as 'about 1799', which would have made her only eleven years old during her first year at Edinburgh University. But when she went up for her army examination in 1813 she gave her age as eighteen, which was probably much nearer the truth, and would put her year of birth back to 1795, which corresponds, more or less, with the age, 'about 70', given on the death certificate in 1865.

Many theories have been advanced about Barry's parentage. It has been suggested that she was 'the illegitimate offspring of some English nobleman', even of the Prince Regent himself, or of his brother, the Duke of York, but these claims were never put forward by Barry, and appear to have no sort of foundation.

A very nebulous figure did the young Barry prove to be when I began my research, and it soon became clear to me that, if I ever hoped for success, I must adopt sleuth-like methods and advance carefully from one piece of evidence

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to another. This being so, the first step, obviously, was to consider the two men to whom Barry dedicated her M.D. thesis in 1812, persons to whom she clearly felt deeply indebted, and who therefore must have influenced her in childhood and adolescence, and these two men were General Francisco de Miranda and David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan.

At first sight the heavy tomes of Miranda's biographies appeared discouraging, but he was a fascinating character, this 'Precursor' of South American Independence—and, incidentally, lover of Catherine the Great—and perseverance was at last rewarded by the discovery that one of his greatest friends was James Barry, R.A. (1741-1806), the Irish artist and protégé of Edmund Burke, who held the post of Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy until he quarrelled too outrageously with Sir Joshua Reynolds, and was expelled at the request of his fellow Academicians.

James Barry, R.A., proved also to be a link between Miranda and the Earl of Buchan. Buchan has been called an 'eccentric Scottish nobleman', but he was rather a man born ahead of his time. He was the founder of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and painting and literature were his major interests. As a connoisseur of art, he had early shown interest in the work of James Barry, R.A., and had done what he could to befriend him, raising a fund to buy an annuity for him when he found him ill and in want in 1802. Three years later £1,000 had been collected and the annuity bought, to which Buchan himself added £20, but before any payment could be made the artist had died, and on 14 March 1806 was buried in St Paul's Cathedral.

That two men named James Barry, one dying in 1806, the other going up to Edinburgh University in 1810, should each claim friendship with General Miranda and the Earl



of Buchan, seemed too great a coincidence to be ignored. There must surely be some kinship between them, but what?

My next step was to investigate the Buchan Papers in the Scottish National Library, and these produced letters of introduction given by the Earl of Buchan in 1810 and 1811 to the young James Barry to take to Dr Robert Anderson, in which he mentioned 'the friendship which subsisted between Barry's uncle' and himself, and also a 'Mrs Bulkeley', who had been with young Barry in Edinburgh. Unfortunately he did not give the name of Barry's uncle, nor the relationship with Mrs Bulkeley. The Index to Miranda's *Archivo*, however, produced a reference to a Miss Bulkeley, who in 1806 had sent verses to General Miranda which she had written on the occasion of James Barry's death. Better still, this Index recorded the existence of a letter written to General Miranda by the young James Barry in 1810, soon after her arrival in Edinburgh. This letter, which I am enabled to print through the kindness of the Venezuelan National Library, is of the utmost importance, as in it James Barry, the student, reveals her relationship with James Barry, the artist, referring to him as 'uncle', and to Mrs Bulkeley as 'aunt', and also makes it clear that she then met the Earl of Buchan for the first time, following an introduction from Dr Fryer, the Duke of Sussex's physician, who had attended James Barry, R.A., in his last illness and who launched the young Barry on Edinburgh society and controlled her finances.

This whole letter to General Miranda deserves to be reproduced at length:

To General Miranda.

Dear Sir,

In a letter I had the honor of receiving from my inestimable friend Dr Fryer, he says that in consequence of your kind

Edinburgh,  
7th January, 1810.



enquiries about my pursuits, etc, he did not conceal from so particular a friend of my late uncle's any circumstances relative to my successore [Success?]; I am truly grateful for the communication, and I think I may congratulate myself on being thought of by so very eminent a Man. The last day of the year I dined at the Earl Buchan's, who said General Miranda was known to him not only by Fame but that he had been introduced to him on his arrival in this Country; I could not help telling his Lordship what a Treasure you possess in London, and how often you permitted me (Barry's nephew) to partake it, it is needless to say I mean your very extensive and elegant Library—of my part—I am studying and attending the Greek, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry and Anatomy Classes, and am honored by the notice of the above mention'd earl and Dr Monro the celebrated professor of Anatomy, the Doctor speaks of you whom he knows by Fame and of Dr Fryer whose correspondence with Lord B—his particular friend, he has read with Enthusiasm.—Excuse my troubling you with this letter, but I could not deny myself the pleasure of wishing you very many happy returns of the new year in which Mrs Bulkeley (my Aunt) joins with me. I must beg the favor when you see Dr Fryer to tell him that Lord Buchan desires me to say that we drank his health at his house in George Street this day week.

I am, Dear Sir, With respect and Esteem

Yours grateful and obedient humble servant

James Barry.

If you should favor me with a line please to direct to James Barry Student at the University, Edinburgh.

As Lord B— nor anyone here knows anything about Mrs Bulkeley's Daughter, I trust my dear General that neither you or the Doctor will mention in any of your correspondence anything about my *Cousin's friendship and ca [care?] for me.*

The postscript, unfortunately, remains a tantalizing enigma. Who Mrs Bulkeley's daughter was, and how she



cared for Barry must remain one of the many mysteries of Barry's life, but the rest of the letter does help to throw light on her antecedents and childhood, and parts of the puzzle begin to fall into place. At least Dr Barry has now, on one side, a grandfather and an Irish ancestry, as the father of James Barry, R.A., and of Mrs Bulkeley was John Barry, a shipmaster of Cork, who, in the mid-eighteenth century, ran a coasting trade between England and Ireland. Little is known of John Barry's family; the most famous of his sons was James Barry, the R.A., a strangely temperamental man whose genius is today becoming more fully recognized than it was during his lifetime. The two, James Barry uncle and 'nephew', had certain hereditary traits in common: both were small of stature, had fiery tempers and quick brains, and were noted as brilliant conversationalists. The little artist was always welcome in London in the circles frequented by Dr Johnson and Dr Burney, where he would wax eloquent on the subject of history, religion and the fine arts; he had studied the classical authors in translation and the French philosophers in the original, and had, besides, a good professional knowledge of anatomy. To be in his company must have been quite a liberal education, and it seems legitimate to assume that James Barry, the younger, as a child, must have imbibed from him a considerable amount of information on a great variety of subjects.

It seems then, also, a reasonable assumption that the younger Barry may have received most of her education—unorthodox maybe, but satisfactory—from her uncle and his friend General Miranda. Both men held strong views not only on the value of education, but on the value of female education, the artist being sufficiently advanced to be a follower of Mary Wollstonecraft and to express the



belief that women should be the 'well instructed companions and confidential associates of man'.

James Barry, R.A., died, it is true, in 1806, but General Miranda lived in London for several years when he was trying to interest William Pitt in the independence of Venezuela, and he probably met the young James Barry during the years 1808-10, and may have done much to influence her choice of career. Barry certainly was paying Miranda no idle compliment when, in that letter of 7 January 1810, she spoke of the 'Treasure you possess in London . . . I mean your very extensive and elegant Library'. It was indeed a very great privilege to be allowed to work in General Miranda's library at 27 Grafton Street, because it was reputed to be at that time the best private library in London. It was valued at £9,000, and estimated to contain about 6,000 volumes, on all subjects and in many languages, and—not least from young Barry's point of view—there was in it a collection of 'treatises such as might be considered to form a tolerably complete Medical Library for a private gentleman'.

Whether Miranda, who was a very versatile man, had time to undertake any personal coaching of Barry we cannot tell, but he certainly took a very friendly interest in the young scholar, whether or not she was then masquerading as a boy, and when he sailed for Venezuela in October 1810 he made arrangements that she should follow him to Caracas as soon as she had obtained her medical degree—a scheme which came to naught, as Miranda was taken prisoner by the Spaniards in 1812 and died four years later. That, however, still lay in the future when, at the end of the year 1809, the young Barry set out for Edinburgh, with her faithful aunt, Mrs Bulkeley, accompanying her.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that in 1809 an



English medical student should choose to take the Edinburgh degree. Edinburgh, in that year of 1809, was a proud city. Her first Golden Age, the Age of Hume, when Scotland had been in the van of European thought, was over. But Edinburgh, some thirty years after the death of Hume, was still a 'modern Athens', and the fame of her University, especially the Medical School, brought students from far and wide. The renewal of the war with Napoleon in 1804 had made study at foreign universities impossible and hastened the trek northward, and about this time such prominent Englishmen as Lord Lansdowne, Lord Palmerston and Lord John Russell were all students of Edinburgh University.

James Barry signed the matriculation roll at Edinburgh University as a 'literary and medical student' in the autumn of the year 1809. In those days this was not a compulsory part of the regulations, in fact the matriculation fee of five shillings was usually paid only by those undergraduates who wished to make use of the College Library, and few questions were asked of the candidate. Barry, for example, merely told the authorities that she was English; no information was required as to parentage or date of birth.

The first step in her academic career thus taken, the next was to settle down with Mrs Bulkeley in furnished lodgings, kept by a Mrs Haggerston, at 6 Lothian Street. The students, of course, had to find their own lodgings in Edinburgh, where the collegiate system of Oxford and Cambridge did not prevail, and there was little opportunity or necessity for them to mingle out of class. Barry appears to have made but one friend at the University, a fellow-student named John Jobson, who in after years declared that he had never suspected her of being a woman, although he sometimes accompanied her through the rough quarters

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of the town, where she seemed 'timid of walking alone', and had been disappointed that he could not teach her to box, as she would keep her arms over her chest 'to protect it from blows'. It seems strange that Barry's sex should not have been suspected from the start—unless she really did pass for a boy not yet in his teens. She was very slightly built and short—only five feet tall according to some authorities—and had a smooth, pale face, high cheek-bones, reddish hair, a 'long Ciceronian nose' and large eyes. And, at a time when the students mostly wore shooting coats, there being no academic dress, she always wore a long *sur-tout*, or overcoat.

Luck, at any rate, was on her side. By the end of her first year at the University she was so well established that her aunt, Mrs Bulkeley, felt able to return to London, and her new friend, the Earl of Buchan, began to look after her welfare. Not only did he, like Miranda, allow her to study in his fine library at Dryburgh, but he found new lodgings for her in the summer of 1810 with that delightful scholar, Dr Robert Anderson—the mentor also of the poet Campbell—to whom he wrote on 5 July, 1810:

My dear Sir,

I have just now the pleasure of your letter of the 29th, which I cannot but greatly approve in the expression of your kindness to poor Barry, and your willingness to take him under your care as a Boarder when Mrs Bulkeley leaves Scotland. Considering the friendship which subsisted between Barry's uncle and myself and other circumstances, I have taken the liberty of recommending him more particularly to your attention as you will see by the two Billets which I send inclosed to your care.

The 'two Billets', unfortunately, are missing, but Buchan wrote again to Dr Anderson on 15 October of the following year:



Dryburgh Abbey.

Dear Sir,

James Barry, who charges himself with this letter . . . has been here for 5 weeks past and has employed himself in my Library very busily in usefull reading of Books connected with his professional views. He is a well disposed young man, and worthy of your notice and advice in his studies.

It will be kind in you and Dr Irving to look at the Latinity of his Thesis which he tells me he is about to prepare this winter, and tho' he is much younger than is usual to take his Degree in Medecine and Surgery yet from what I have observed likely to entitle himself to them by his attainments.

He means to go by invitation of General Miranda to The Caracas.

I am, Dear Sir, Yours with esteem,

Buchan

Barry made a nice gesture of gratitude when she joined Buchan's name to Miranda's in the dedication of the completed Thesis:

*Viro optimo ac dignissimo, David Steuart Erskine, Comiti de Buchan, etc, etc. Artibus Litterisque humanioribus, quas et ipse feliciter coluit, plurimum faventi, hanc dissertationem inauguralem, gratam acceptamque cupit auctor.*

Of Miranda she had said:

*Celsissimo, Duci Celeberrimo, Patriae Jus dilectissimae . . . vindicanti etc., etc., . . . ob curam paternam et plurima beneficia in se et suos benigne collata, hoc tentamen inaugurale dat dicat dedicatque Jacobus Barry.*

And on the frontispiece of the thesis Barry put some lines from Menander, 'Do not consider my youth, but consider whether I show a man's wisdom.'

There is no doubt that the last year at the University was proving the most testing of any, as Barry's still youthful



appearance had been giving rise to comment, although in 1812 the University had no rule about the age of an examination candidate. The regulation that no person should receive a degree under the age of twenty-one was not introduced until after the Royal Commission on Scottish Universities had made its report in 1830. Then the Commissioners specifically asked the Principal of Edinburgh University if leave would be granted to 'a very young boy' to attend certain classes, and received the answer:

I cannot conceive that any Professor would give a ticket to a boy of 11 or 12 years of age to go to Moral or Natural Philosophy; but I know no regulation of the University, or any statute of the Town Council prohibiting it.

James Barry, at any rate, had no difficulty in gaining admission to classes. The list of lectures attended by her which she submitted to the Army Medical Department in response to a request for a statement of qualifications is quite staggeringly comprehensive:

I commenced the Study of my Profession at the University of Edinburgh as Literary & Medical Student in the year 1810. The following are the classes I attended:

Dr Gregory: Practice of Physic.	12 months 1811-12
Dr Duncan: Theory of Medicine	2 courses of Clinical Lectures.
	3 courses in 1811-12
Dr Hope: Chemistry	18 courses in 1810-11-12
Dr Rutherford: Botany	12 courses in 1810
Dr Munro: Anatomy	3 courses of Morbid Anatomy
	2 courses of Morbid Anatomy
Dr Thompson: Military Surgery	1 course in 1811
Dr Hamilton: Midwifery	3 courses in 1810-11-12



Mr Fyfe: Dissection

3 courses in 1810-11-12

Mr Russell: Clinical Surgical Lectures in 1811-12

Barclay & Murray's Private Lectures, 1810-11-12

Dr Duncan's Lectures: Medical Jurisprudence

Literary Classes: Greek, Natural & Moral Philosophy, etc.

Private Pupil to Mr Fyfe. . . .

I likewise attended the undermentioned Hospitals as a regular Pupil: Guy's & St Thomas in London for 6 months.

Royal Infirmary, Dispensary & Lying-in Hospital, Edinburgh for 12 months in the year 1811-12 as perpetual pupil.

I received a Diploma dated in 1812 as Doctor of Medicine from the University of Edinburgh.

It is a list which should have impressed the Army Medical Department, for Barry had studied under the men who had made Edinburgh the foremost Medical School in Britain. The famous names are all there.

Unfortunately during the period of Barry's residence in Edinburgh the University was so overcrowded that very few records were kept. There were, in 1809, over 1,900 students; to have a class of 300 was quite normal for a popular lecturer such as Dr John Barclay, but handling such classes presented great difficulties in the congested classrooms of the time—the moment when the University was in the throes of re-building—and of all Barry's lecturers only one, Professor T. C. Hope, appears to have kept an attendance book, and even he only noted down in it Barry's name and address, without comment.

The wide range of subjects in the courses taken by Barry reveal that wholehearted devotion to her profession which inspired her throughout her life. She was not compelled to study midwifery, or dissection, for these were, strangely enough, not examination subjects in 1810; very few students studied practical anatomy. Barry not only did so, but



became, as she tells us, 'private pupil to Mr Fyfe'. Andrew Fyfe was the 'Prosector' who took charge of the dissecting room and demonstrated to the students. He was said to be 'a horrid lecturer, but an industrious worthy man, and a good practical anatomist', and, as practical anatomy was not popular, there was not then that dearth of 'subjects' which, in later years, gave rise in Edinburgh to all the scandals of body-snatching. In 1810, in leisurely conditions, Barry demonstrated to Fyfe every afternoon what she had done with the 'part' allocated to her for dissection, thus gaining a first-hand knowledge of anatomy instead of relying solely upon textbooks like so many of her contemporaries.

There is no doubt that few students can have prepared themselves more thoroughly than did James Barry for the Edinburgh M.D. examination of 1812, but even so it must have been a somewhat terrifying prospect. First of all the thesis—an integral part of the examination until 1830—had to be prepared, submitted to a professor for his approval and signature, and then printed, at the candidate's expense, by the University Press, and a copy presented to each member of the Faculty of Medicine. Then on Graduation Day the writer had to defend his thesis before receiving his degree! Barry, as we know, had begun work on hers, *De merocele, vel hernia crurali* (on hernia of the groin), in the winter of 1811, and even if Dr Anderson and Dr Irving had, as the Earl of Buchan suggested, helped with the 'Latinity' of it, she must have been herself a good Latin scholar, as the greater part of the examination was a *viva* in that tongue, and the University authorities would not allow the examination to proceed if the candidate had an inadequate knowledge of the language. The usual procedure was for the candidate to go to a professor's house where all the other



members of the Medical Faculty were assembled, ready to put questions to him in turn. As well as this he had to explain and illustrate two Aphorisms of Hippocrates and comment on two 'cases' given to him. It is no wonder that the M.D. of Edinburgh was a much prized diploma, not always obtained at the first attempt. Barry, however, justified Buchan's faith in her, and emerged successfully from the ordeal.

Dr James Barry now had her foot on the first rung of the ladder to fame, and had made history, although that was not known at the time, by being the first woman in Britain to graduate M.D.

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## II

DR BARRY, having gained her M.D., was not prepared to rest on her laurels—although many contemporary surgeons rested on far less—and she decided to return to London and take a course of surgery under the most famous surgeon of the day, Sir Astley Cooper of Guy's, whose work was such that it has been said 'to mark a new era' in surgery. On 17 October 1812, 'James Barry, M.D. paid £20 entrance money to become a pupil-dresser to Mr Whitfield', then Apothecary and unofficial Medical School Secretary of St Thomas's Hospital.

Although there might seem to be some confusion here between the two hospitals, Guy's and St Thomas's, there was, in fact, none in the early nineteenth century. St Thomas's did not then occupy its present position opposite to the Houses of Parliament but was situated in the Borough, in Southwark High Street, just across the road from Guy's, and from 1769 to 1825 the two hospitals were known as the 'United Hospitals', and divided the teaching between them, the anatomy and surgery lectures being held at St Thomas's, the medical lectures at Guy's, but the surgery pupils had the right of entry to both institutions, 'free to jostle and push their way to the bedside, or into the narrow galleries of the operating theatres in either hospital.'

Barry, however, was able to keep aloof from this jostling mass by the fact that she had registered as a 'pupil dresser', which, in the hospital hierarchy, ranked above the ordinary pupil and below the surgeon's apprentice. The post of



dresser was a coveted one because it carried many privileges, but it required also very good qualifications, as the number of dressers was limited to twenty-four, each surgeon being allowed only four.

The dressers obtained a close-up view of all cases and operations as they either 'assisted their surgeons at the table', or sat in seats reserved for them in the theatre. But in those early nineteenth-century days, before the introduction of anaesthetics, an operation must often have been an experience to tax the strongest male nerves. An amputation or an internal operation performed under the conditions then prevailing is something scarcely to be contemplated even at this distance of time. That Dr Barry could steel herself to endure these horrors is proof of the strength of her determination to succeed in her profession. The dressers also followed their surgeon on his rounds of the wards, each proudly bearing his 'skellet' or 'plaister-box', which contained 'plaisters, bandages and linseed-meal'. This walking of the wards, which Astley Cooper did twice a week, was quite a feat of physical endurance at St Thomas's, as the round extended from end to end of the hospital, all nineteen wards being visited, and the hospital contained about 450 patients.

Attendance in the small, stuffy, anatomical theatre was even more of a strain, and dissecting lectures were very different from the leisurely courses of instruction given by Mr Fyfe in Edinburgh. At St Thomas's, in 1813, the dissecting-room was 'almost filled with 12 tables' and its atmosphere was such that only the 'more diligent' pupils dissected—the others fearing lest they should thereby 'endanger their health and perhaps their existence'. But we may be sure that, as one of the 'more diligent' pupils, James Barry was there!



As a dresser Barry had to take her part in the rota system by which each took it in turn to do a week's residential duty in the hospital, acting more or less as house surgeon. During this week of duty the dressers were responsible for all the dressings in the wards, and in an emergency had to decide whether the surgeon should be called. They also had to deal with all the casualties, and what would now be called the 'out-patient department' seems to have been particularly busy; between accidents and hernias, and extractions of teeth and venesections, the doctor in charge had to work on until 'two or three o'clock, till the Surgery was emptied'!

Barry must have found the work very hard, but, to her, one of its greatest compensations may have been that always during this week of duty the dresser was provided with a private sitting-room and bedroom in the hospital. However, she achieved it, Barry guarded her secret well during her six months training at St Thomas's, where her youthful and girlish appearance seems to have aroused no comment. Towards the end of the course she was examined by the College of Surgeons of London. She herself stated that she had passed such an examination, but did not claim to have been awarded a diploma, and it may be that the College was examining on behalf of the Army. The records of the Royal College of Surgeons show that a Samuel Barry—quite possibly a mistake for James—was 'examined and passed as a Regimental Surgeon on 15 January 1813'.

In June 1813 she was successful in the Army Medical Board examination, and was commissioned as a Hospital Assistant on 5 July. This army entrance examination might have been an almost insuperable obstacle to an army career, since a physical examination would at once have revealed her sex. Some writers have made the unwarranted assertion that for Barry an exception must have been made



at the request of some 'higher authority', and that the physical examination did not take place. It is quite possible that it did not, but that may not have been exceptional—forty years later there were complaints that the physical examination more often than not went by default, and in 1813, when Barry's case was considered, potential 'Hospital Assistants' with M.D. degrees were at a premium. A very superficial test might have satisfied the Army Medical Board when confronted with an obviously brilliant young doctor like Barry, with an unusually high standard of professional training.

At that time, towards the end of the Peninsular War, James (later Sir James) McGrigor was Wellington's chief medical officer and was doing much to raise the standard of the service given by the Army Medical Department to the wounded, and, also, the status of the medical officer. For the first time, after the siege of Badajoz in 1812, army doctors were mentioned in despatches: the Army Medical Service had become a worthwhile profession for ambitious youth. Whether this fact influenced Barry in the choice of her career it is impossible to say. As she had been prepared to follow General Miranda in the field, she may simply have felt, when that scheme fell through, that the next best thing was to become a surgeon in the British Army. At any rate, there she was, on 5 July 1813, gazetted as a 'Hospital Assistant'.

This term, 'Hospital Assistant', has long fallen into disuse, and the whole set-up of the Army Medical Department in 1813 was very different from that of the Royal Army Medical Corps today. The medical officer had no military rank then—'only an ill-defined status giving him advantages attaching to corresponding military rank'; the surgeons usually ranked as captains, the assistant-surgeons as subalterns, and the hospital assistants were very junior



indeed, but they were commissioned officers. The title was only a month old when Barry joined the army; had she joined a few weeks earlier she would have been a 'Hospital Mate' but in June 1813 the term Hospital Assistant was introduced to distinguish the commissioned officer from the N.C.O.—hitherto hospital mates had been both commissioned and warrant officers, now the mates were warrant officers only.

At this period the Army Medical Department was divided into two distinct parts, always slightly antagonistic: one the regimental, the other dealing with the staffs and hospitals, and it is most important to remember that Barry joined the army as a hospital assistant, not as a surgeon's mate, thus deliberately rejecting a regimental career; she never was a regimental surgeon. Why she chose the life of staffs and garrisons in preference to the other we cannot tell, although of course, as a woman, Barry ran less risk of detection as a staff surgeon than as a regimental surgeon. Barry, too, might have had no wish to stay in England, and a staff appointment led almost certainly to foreign service. There were then only five big home garrisons: Berwick, Hull, Portsmouth, Plymouth, and the Tower of London. Each garrison had a separate staff consisting of hospital mates and assistants, apothecaries, surgeons, physicians, purveyors and directors, but even so their requirements were limited, and in 1807, when there were sixty surgeons to the forces, all but seven of them were serving abroad. To be posted to a permanent garrison abroad also gave some sort of security of tenure, as there was less chance of being placed on half-pay at the end of a war.

It was to the Plymouth garrison that Barry was first posted, and here disaster very nearly overtook her. When she arrived, the medical officer at the station objected to



receiving her on account of her childish appearance. Luckily for her, he was told, 'on referring the matter to the authorities, "that it was not desirable to agitate the question"'. Possibly in this we may discern the hand of Barry's good friend, the Earl of Buchan, who had already written to Dr Skey (an Edinburgh M.D.) who was in charge of the Plymouth General Hospital, commending his protégé to his care.

After Barry had been four months at Plymouth, Buchan received from Dr Skey a favourable progress report. This report he sent, on 20 November 1813, to Dr Anderson, who was evidently still interested in the career of his strange little boarder. Buchan wrote:

I send you a letter relating to poor James Barry which came to my hand a few days ago from Dr Skey of the General Hospital, Plymouth, to whom I had recommended him. Dr Skey's handwriting is almost illegible but I make it out after a good deal of decyphering, and find that he has found favour with his principal, whom I intend to thank for his attentions and request the continuance of them.

Dr Barry was now established in her career, but, like most hospital assistants, she had to wait about two years for promotion, and, with the exception of a short spell of service 'at Chelsea', about which nothing more is known, the time was spent at Plymouth. Then on 7 December 1815 she was gazetted Assistant-Surgeon to the Forces, and in the following year was ordered to the Cape of Good Hope as Assistant-Surgeon to the garrison of Cape Town. Whether she travelled by troopship, or, as some say, by 'passenger packet' cannot be ascertained, but she duly arrived at the Cape in August 1816, armed with letters of introduction—including one from the Earl of Buchan—to His Excellency the Governor, Lord Charles Somerset.



### III

THE James Barry who arrived at the Cape in 1816 was a very different person from the shy student in the drab overcoat who had come to Edinburgh six years earlier. No longer was she the 'poor James Barry' of Buchan's letters, but a young officer with considerable selfassurance, and a certain flamboyance in dress. When on duty Dr Barry appeared wearing a plumed cocked hat, long spurs and a large sword. Some modern writers, would-be psychiatrists, have seen in these accoutrements a compensatory urge to make up for her small stature, but actually it was the ordinary dress of a military doctor of the period. Sir James McGrigor recorded in his *Autobiography* the effect made upon him, then a very junior student at the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, by the entry of one of the senior students who had just become a regimental assistant-surgeon:

he had exchanged his round hat for a smart cocked hat, mounted a cockade in it, and strutted to the Infirmary. . . .

He attracted the attention of all, and the admiration of some.

Later, when Sir James himself had become a regimental surgeon in the Blues, the Colonel insisted on his appearing in the dress of the corps; 'and', he says,

I burst into a laugh at my own appearance, equipped as I was with a broad buff belt, jack boots that came high up my thighs, and stout leather gloves which reached nearly to my elbows, with a large fierce-looking cocked hat, and a sword of great weight, as well as length.

What Dr Barry did do to compensate for lack of inches



was, most practically, to insert three-inch false soles into her boots, and to heighten her heels; the coloured people called her 'the Kapok doktor' because they insisted that the shoulders of the uniform jacket were stuffed with cotton wool to give extra breadth. When off duty Dr Barry went to balls wearing 'a coat of the latest pea-green Hayne, a satin waistcoat, and a pair of tight-fitting "inexpressibles"'. At balls it was also noted that Dr Barry flirted with all the best looking women in the room. Apart from this ostentation in dress Dr Barry lived simply, in rooms in the boarding house of the Widow Sandenberg at No. 12 Heerengracht.

The assurance with which Assistant-Staff-Surgeon Barry seems to have behaved at this period is the more remarkable because the people with whom she came into contact were usually surprised by her slight and girlish appearance. Lord Albemarle, who visited the Cape in 1819 and sat next to her at dinner at one of the regimental messes, described 'a beardless lad, . . .—with a certain effeminacy in his manner which he was always striving to overcome . . . his style of conversation was greatly superior to that usually heard at a mess-table'. These reminiscences of Lord Albemarle suffer from a fault only too common in most memoirs of Dr Barry—they were published in 1876, fifty-five years after the events they portray, and eleven years after Barry's death and the subsequent exposure of the mystery of the little doctor's sex and origin.

The testimony, however, of the Count of Las Cases (a Frenchman who had gone into exile with Napoleon, but who in 1817 was housed in the Castle at Cape Town awaiting repatriation) can be in no way suspect, and is, in fact, the only trustworthy and genuinely contemporary description of Dr Barry in existence. Las Cases actually published his *Journal of the Private Life and Conversations of the*

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*Emperor Napoleon at St Helena* in 1823, and in it he related that on 20 January, 1817:

I received a visit from one of the captains of our station at St Helena. Knowing the state of my son's health, he brought a medical gentleman along with him. This was a mark of attention on his part, but the introduction occasioned, for some moments, a curious misunderstanding. I mistook the Captain's medical friend for his son, or nephew. The grave Doctor, who was presented to me, was a boy of 18, with the form, the manners, and the voice of a woman. But Mr Barry (such was his name) was described to be an absolute phenomenon. I was informed that he had obtained his diploma at the age of 13, after the most rigid examination, and that he had performed extraordinary cures at the Cape.

After this initial visit Dr Barry frequently saw Las Cases, who found the visits 'very agreeable'. Dr Barry recommended the Count to take care of his health, stating that it was out of her power to prescribe a remedy for him, but for his son, Emmanuel, she prescribed 'the use of baths'. Emmanuel was in a sadly debilitated and nervous state, and no wonder, for his father had made him act as his secretary, and the poor lad had to transcribe all the long conversations which his father had had with Napoleon and which were afterwards to appear in the eight-volume *Journal*. In order, presumably, to cheer him up, Dr Barry one day escorted Emmanuel to the window of the castle—where he was to all intents and purposes a prisoner—and there introduced him to two ladies waiting in their carriage in the courtyard below. The two ladies were the daughters of the Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, and Dr Barry was on the best of terms with them; indeed although she had now been only six months in Cape Town she was already *persona grata* at Government House, and, according to Las



Cases, was 'a sort of favourite in the Somerset family', having saved the life of one of the Governor's daughters, 'after she had been given up'.

The Governor, Lord Charles Somerset, was, in 1817, a handsome and energetic widower of forty-nine. He was the second son of the 5th Duke of Beaufort, and brother of Lord Fitzroy Somerset (later Lord Raglan) and he must have had a goodly share of the family charm. Unfortunately there was an arrogant and tactless side to his character which gained him many enemies. Some people saw in him only an unpleasant autocrat; others, of whom Dr Barry was one, served him with devotion. He was indeed a complex character; one South African historian qualifies his statement that 'the whole 12 years of Lord Charles Somerset's government forms one of the darkest parts of South African history' by adding 'many of his measures and the sentiments expressed in his numerous despatches to Earl Bathurst indicate that, in his own peculiar way, he had the welfare of the Colony at heart'.

In 1817 Lord Charles had only been three years at the Cape, and the clouds which were to darken the last years of his administration were still on the far horizon. To young Dr Barry South African life must have seemed extraordinarily pleasant. The duties of an assistant-surgeon to the garrison were not arduous, as the station was a very healthy one. Dr Barry, at any rate, had no difficulty in gaining permission to accompany Lord Charles Somerset, as his medical officer, on a tour of the Colony which Lord Charles undertook in January 1817. This tour has a certain picnic air about it as Lord Charles's two daughters also accompanied him, but at the same time it was no light undertaking, the party travelling many hundreds of miles on horseback until they reached the Great Fish River and



the bush. The object of the expedition was to impress upon the Kaffir chief, Gaika, the power of British might, and the necessity of controlling the outbreaks of theft and violence which were becoming too frequent on the frontier. The Governor was well fitted for such a task; at the end of March he halted at Somerset Farm (now East Somerset) and collected a military force to make a ceremonial entry into Kaffirland, and then, with considerable pomp and dignity, camped on a spot opposite to Chief Gaika's headquarters:

The troops and burghers were drawn up and formed 3 sides of a square, with two small cannons placed on the right and left. In the centre was the Governor's marquee.

To the marquee, somewhat intimidated, in spite of his guard of 300 men with assegais, came Gaika. The conference then took place. Gaika agreed to all the Governor's demands, and, at the end, received from the Governor the gifts of a beautiful grey horse and a sack of presents: shoes, handkerchiefs, shawls, buttons, knives and tinder-boxes. His work accomplished, Lord Charles Somerset immediately set off on the return journey, with his daughters, his officials and his doctor, and, travelling by Graaff Reinet and through the Karroo, they arrived back at Cape Town on 21 April.

During those three months Dr Barry must have performed the duties of medical officer to the complete satisfaction of Lord Charles, who, on 7 December of the same year, 1817, appointed her Physician to his Household, a very good post which carried with it a residence in the grounds of Government House and a salary of 600 rixdollars. Dr Barry was also appointed Second Member of the Vaccine Institution, at a salary of 1,200 rixdollars, and such was her growing professional fame that she was often called to cases as a consultant. In this capacity Dr Barry became



very popular, and many stories were, and are still, told at the Cape about her. Surgeon-General McKinnon, for instance, said: 'Barry was a pleasant and agreeable man. He neither cursed nor swore, but behaved himself like a gentleman.' Dr Barry was indeed on very good terms with all her fellow practitioners, who all had a very healthy respect for her professional skill. Dr Barry's method, when called in to a case, was carefully to remove all medicines, etc. already prescribed, and to clear the sick room, often ordering the patient a bath (sometimes of Cape wine, which would have had antiseptic properties) and even opening the windows. After that, never asking for a second opinion,

happen what might, he claimed the whole credit of a cure, or blamed others for failure. He was, to be sure, sent for at times as a last resource. If the patient recovered, Dr James had all the merit; if death ensued—'Dr James had unfortunately been summoned when the case was hopeless.'

As private physician to H.E. the Governor, Dr Barry had an anxious time in the autumn of 1818 when Lord Charles developed what she diagnosed as 'typhus with dysentery'. According to a letter written by the Colonial Secretary, Colonel Bird, to Earl Bathurst on 29 September, the illness had so much reduced the patient that his recovery was considered 'very precarious'.

There appears to have been a return of disease for the last 3 or 4 nights at about 10 o'clock, and last night his Lordship was delirious. Lord Charles' habits of great temperance are probably much in his favour, but Dr Barry nevertheless expresses so much apprehension that I cannot delay making your Lordship acquainted with the state in which he now is. Should an unfavourable turn take place I shall forthwith despatch the Colonial Schooner to England with the tidings. . . . I shall, however, entertain hopes that it will not be necessary.

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Fortunately it was not necessary. Lord Charles made a complete recovery, which must have given him a greater faith than ever in his doctor.

It was lucky that Dr Barry was at hand to give attention to the Governor in this crisis, for, had the illness occurred in the following year, his personal physician would have been absent in Mauritius. In the winter of 1819 Assistant-Surgeon Barry was sent hurriedly to that island to help the sadly overworked medical staff to deal with an outbreak of cholera.

This outbreak was most disquieting to the authorities in South Africa, where cholera had never been known, and how it started in Mauritius was never discovered. The first case was notified on 20 November 1819, and thereafter cholera raged throughout the island until the following February. If the patients were treated in the early stages of the disease there was a possibility of recovery, but at the height of the epidemic it became a problem to bury the dead. As far as the military were concerned the epidemic was not particularly serious; the deaths were estimated at two per cent of the strength, about thirty-two men. At Port Louis, the capital of the island, thirteen men died out of 601, but, at an outpost seven miles north, where there was only a single-storey barracks 'always deemed insalubrious', six men died out of 150, and the 'cases were of so virulent a character that only eight recovered out of 14 attacked'. In the first month, on an average, about one in six of the men attacked died, in the second one in twelve, and the mortality continued to decrease until the last case among the troops was notified on 3 February 1820, and Dr Barry was free to return to Cape Town.

Neither Dr Barry's cure of His Excellency the Governor, nor this work among the cholera-stricken men in Mauritius



brought her as much fame as one successful case of midwifery. One day Dr Barry was hastily called in by Thomas Munnik, a wealthy snuff manufacturer in Cape Town, whose wife appeared to be on the point of death in childbirth, and Dr Barry, seemingly at once, performed a Caesarean section, saving the lives of both mother and child. At this time this was quite an amazing thing to have done, as, although such an operation had been performed successfully in Zurich in 1818, it was not until 1833 in Great Britain that both mother and child survived. Dr Barry had learnt midwifery at Edinburgh from Dr James Hamilton, and a manuscript collection of Hamilton's lectures contains a detailed description of the operation—Hamilton having performed it twice, but unsuccessfully. Dr Barry, however, was successful; the baby was named James Barry (at the doctor's request, and in lieu of fee) and, as may be imagined, there was tremendous jubilation in the Munnik family, and a wonderful christening feast held, with Dr Barry as the guest of honour. In time the baby grew up and had children of his own, one of whom, James Barry Munnik, became Town Clerk of Wynberg, and also godfather to James Barry Munnik Hertzog, later General Hertzog, Prime Minister of South Africa, who was named after him!

Dr Barry did not always respond with equanimity to unnecessary calls, and acquired a reputation for having a quick, if not a quarrelsome temper, and it was said 'that if anything touched his importance, his anger knew no bounds'. This dignity was much hurt on one occasion by a clergyman who had sent a polite note with a request to pull out an aching tooth. 'Does this stupid parson suppose that I am a vulgar tooth-drawer?' she stormed, and forthwith went to a coloured farrier, Thomas, and informed him



that the clergyman's donkey needed attention. Thomas arrived at the house with hand-vices and pincers. When the clergyman asked what it meant, Thomas replied: 'Dr Barry has instructed me to come without delay to draw the tooth of a donkey.'

One day Dr Barry went too far, and found herself with a duel on her hands, with the Governor's A.D.C. Captain (later Sir) Josias Cleote. There are several versions of the story, but Cleote's own tale, as told, after Dr Barry's death, to Sir William Macintosh, runs as follows:

I am the only officer in the British Army who has ever fought a duel with a woman. When I was A.D.C. to Lord Charles Somerset at the Cape, a buxom lady called to see him on business of a private nature, and of course they were closeted for some time. Dr Barry made some disparaging remarks about this: 'Oh, I say, Cleote', he sneered, 'that's a nice Dutch filly the Governor has got hold of.' 'Retract your vile expression, you infernal little cad' said I, advancing and pulling his long ugly nose. Barry immediately challenged me, and we fought with pistols, fortunately without effect.

Afterwards Cleote and Barry became firm friends, a friendship which lasted until the end of their lives.

Dr James Barry was by now one of the well known characters of Cape Town, and people ceased to wonder as in uniform she trotted down the street on her pony, wearing cocked hat and long sword, and followed by the usual retinue of large black servant and small black dog. The years 1817-20 may well have been the happiest in Dr Barry's life. After that things were never quite the same again, the idyllic days were over.

Dr Barry returned to Cape Town from the cholera-stricken island of Mauritius in February 1820 to find that Lord Charles Somerset had left for England on leave some



weeks earlier. The Acting-Governor, Sir Rufane Donkin, was a very different type of man, and the Somerset party, of whom Dr Barry was so definitely one, must have found him intolerable. He was determined, for instance, to reduce Lord Charles's extravagant expenditure, and succeeded in cutting the maintenance costs of Government House by more than one-half, and considerably reduced the outlay on the Governor's summer residence at Newlands and Camp's Bay, and on his shooting box at Groote Post farm! Donkin also made changes in the administration, some wise and some unwise, so that it is perhaps not surprising that Lord Charles, on returning to the Cape on 1 December 1821, refused either to see him or to speak to him. When the warship, *Hyperion*, which had brought Lord Charles back, anchored in Table Bay on 30 November, the Governor refused to meet the staff officer sent by Sir Rufane to greet him. That evening, however, Lord Charles's son Captain Henry Somerset, his A.D.C. Major Cleote, and Dr James Barry all went on board to welcome him and to congratulate him on his second marriage, which had taken place while he was in England, and they were all most graciously received and entertained.

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## IV

LORD CHARLES SOMERSET, on his return to duty, undid much that Sir Rufane Donkin had done, and rescinded many of his decisions, but—fortunately as it turned out for Dr James Barry—there was one decree of Donkin's which he allowed to stand, and that was his establishment, in September 1821, of the office of Colonial Medical Inspector.

Actually this was one of Donkin's retrenchments. During his investigation of Cape affairs, he had discovered that the Supreme Medical Superintendence of the Cape, as established by Proclamation in 1807, for the purpose 'of prohibiting all Persons from practising any of the Branches of the Medical Profession, except under licence from the Governor' was no longer functioning in its original form. According to its constitution it consisted of a President and six members who were empowered to examine and report upon the certificates and qualifications of candidates wishing to practise. They also had authority to examine all medicine imported and sold at the Cape, and to destroy any that they found unfit for use. By 1811 the numbers of the Board had dwindled to one solitary member, who died in 1818, leaving only the President, who continued unaided to carry out the work of the Board, until he too died in 1821. Thereupon Sir Rufane Donkin decided that the Supreme Medical Committee could be abolished with no loss to the community and, indeed, with considerable financial gain, if its duties were undertaken 'by one officer under the title of Colonial Medical Inspector'. Announcing this fact to



Earl Bathurst in a letter of 20 September 1821, Sir Rufane Donkin was able to write with some satisfaction, 'by this arrangement a saving will arise annually to the Colony of nearly 1800 Rixdollars, while I have secured a due performance of all the duties which were formerly executed in a more complicated and more expensive manner'. The following day he appointed Dr John Robb to be Colonial Medical Inspector and Director of the Vaccine Institution.

Within six months the office was vacant again, as Dr Robb decided to return to England. So, on 18 March 1822, Lord Charles Somerset gave the post to Dr James Barry with a salary of 2,400 rixdollars a year; this, of course, was the end of Donkin's economies, as Dr Barry was not, like her predecessor, Director of the Vaccine Institution. Although the rixdollar was a depreciating currency, worth at that time about 1s. 6d., Dr Barry was now earning quite a considerable income, as, apart from any consultant's fees and military pay, she was receiving annually 600 rixdollars as Physician to the Governor's Household, and 1,200 rixdollars as Vaccinating Surgeon of the Vaccine Institution. The War Office, however, put her on half pay, after making enquiries into her 'salary and emoluments', from 25 May 1821 to 6 May 1824.

Subsequent events were to prove that there was a certain confusion about Dr Barry's acceptance of the Inspectorship. She believed at the time that it was a permanent appointment, and said later that this idea was confirmed by Lord Charles's request that, in accepting it, she should abandon her army career. Whether the Governor had by this time discovered Dr Barry's secret and thought that this was an excellent method of ending so difficult a situation, it is impossible to tell. Dr Barry stood firm and refused to be extricated from a so far tenable position; she remained in



the army, although, as we have seen, on half pay until May 1824, and, as the Inspectorship ultimately proved to be far from permanent, it was as well that Lord Charles Somerset's advice had not been taken.

One thing with which Dr Barry was afflicted throughout life was a daemon of a conscience; it drove her to do her duty, as she perceived it, whatever the cost to herself and others. As Colonial Medical Inspector she was determined to carry out instructions meticulously, and was consequently soon launched upon a sea of troubles.

She turned her attention first to the sale of drugs. On the subject of patent medicines she held strong views; she felt that they should only be administered by qualified men who knew something of the drugs they were using: 'to my certain knowledge,' she said, 'many persons have been poisoned by patent medicines given improperly—and pedlars and hawkers of drugs in the Interior and in Cape Town, do more real injury to the inhabitants than the most virulent diseases themselves'.

Before two years had passed Dr Barry had carried out so faithfully her inspection of drugs, poisons, etc., that the Merchant Importers of Medicine at the Cape could stand it no longer, and in May 1824 they addressed a Memorial to H.E. the Governor in which they stated tactfully that although they had no objection to their medicines being examined, and no objection to the manner in which Dr Barry examined them, yet they felt that, as the law stood, it put too much power into the hands of one individual. On this point Dr Barry was quite ready to compromise; in the event of any dispute she was prepared, she said, to refer the question to a Board, but she still felt that the retail of patent and other medicines should be restricted to licensed apothecaries. By now the Memorial of the Merchant



Importers had been passed to the Chief Justice who, apart from giving a definite opinion that it was impossible to restrict the sale of medicine in country districts to qualified apothecaries, made his report in such vague terms that all parties appeared satisfied, and the affair ended amicably. The Memorial was finally rejected by the Governor, and that may have encouraged Dr Barry to treat the next problem with equal intransigence.

This problem was whether Mr Charles Frederick Liesching, son of Dr Liesching, one of the Town Prison doctors, should be permitted to practise as an apothecary. He had made the necessary application to the Governor, and so the Acting Colonial Secretary asked Dr Barry to examine the young man on 3 August 1824. The granting of these licences was perhaps the most important duty of the Colonial Medical Inspector; physicians, before being allowed to practise, had to produce their 'Diplomas from Europe', the surgeons and apothecaries 'such certificate as is usually required in these Arts'. The position of young Liesching was rather unusual: his father, a pioneer settler, had been established as an apothecary and physician since 1800, when, having none of the necessary degrees, he had been 'permitted rather than licensed by the Governor' to practise. As the years went on, Liesching senior withdrew from the apothecary's profession to devote more of his time to medicine, and he left his shop in the hands of two assistants who held diplomas from Europe. Young Liesching had served a five-year apprenticeship under these men and had afterwards spent five years as an 'acting partner' in his father's business, so that his training may have been quite adequate; but Dr Barry was determined to keep to the letter of the law, and, as the young man could only produce a certificate signed by his father, refused to examine him.

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'Sir,' she wrote to the Acting Colonial Secretary, 'as Mr Liesching has not had any professional education, consequently no regular documents, it becomes impossible for me to recommend Mr Liesching to be allowed to practise as Apothecary, Chemist & Druggist in the Colony.'

Far from this being the end of the matter, as Dr Barry probably expected, it proved to be but the beginning. The Lieschings were an old and influential family, and they were not prepared to accept an adverse ruling from the Colonial Medical Inspector. Once again the Governor found an anti-Barry Memorial in his hands, this time from young Liesching.

It is greatly to Dr Barry's credit that on a matter of principle such as this she was adamant, even though opposition to the Governor might cost her his friendship, which she valued highly. Towards the end of September, being unable to shake Dr Barry's determination, Lord Charles sought an opinion on the legal meaning of the words 'such certificate as is *usually* required for these arts', words on which the whole issue of the case depended. The Chief Justice replied that 'usual is what has been the custom, and Liesching should be allowed to practise'.

Dr Barry refused to accept this judgment, refused to recognize the right of the Chief Justice to lay down the law respecting the medical profession, refused to alter her opinion in regard to Liesching's qualifications: 'I do think', she wrote on 24 September, 'that permitting any Persons to practise who have not been regularly educated would be the greatest injury to the medical profession.'

Nothing daunted, Lord Charles Somerset next proceeded to refer the question to the civil dignitary who wielded perhaps more power than anyone else at the Cape, and who was no friend to Dr Barry—His Majesty's Fiscal, Daniel



Denyssen, Esq., LL.D. The Fiscal's reply was entirely satisfactory to the Governor and on 14 December 1824 the Colonial Secretary, Sir Richard Plasket, was instructed to convey to Dr Barry that it was His Excellency's pleasure that Mr Liesching should be examined.

A fortnight elapsed, and, except that Dr Barry went to Newlands and had a stormy interview with Lord Charles Somerset, nothing happened. So on 28 December 1824 Sir Richard Plasket wrote again, asking what steps Dr Barry had taken to examine Liesching. Dr Barry had, of course, taken none, as she still felt that Liesching was an unsuitable candidate, and that she could not legally be called upon to examine a candidate without 'the usual Certificate'. She therefore wrote to Plasket asking to be relieved of the duty of examining Liesching, and, 'out of deference to the objection' thus expressed by the Colonial Medical Inspector, the Governor ordered a medical board to assemble for that purpose consisting of the Physician, Surgeon, and Apothecary to the Forces. These gentlemen promptly examined Liesching and, on 25 January 1825, they reported to the Governor that they had 'no hesitation in saying that they considered him fully competent and qualified for carrying on the business of Apothecary, Chemist & Druggist'.

So Liesching received his licence to practise as an apothecary, and Dr Barry retained her integrity, but in the process, although she may not have realized it at the time, she had made an enemy of the Colonial Secretary, Sir Richard Plasket, who very much disliked her outspokenness, which he held to be unseemly in official correspondence. It cannot be denied that Dr Barry had a fiery temper; she had been much tried in the Liesching affair, and she did allow her pen to run away with her, writing letters 'in a tone of

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unbecoming warmth'. According to Plasket, Dr Barry, 'even in his official intercourse with the Highest Persons in the Government was quite unmindful of the respect that he owed to their rank and station'.

Sir Richard Plasket was a civil servant with twenty-seven years' experience, and there is no doubt that Dr Barry's unorthodox behaviour was anathema to him. He was horrified by her disrespectful attitude towards the Chief Justice; he ignored all the moral issues at stake in the Liesching case, and simply dismissed her letter of 24 September as 'most impertinent'. He warned Dr Barry that 'if he were not more cautious as to his expressions, he would certainly get into a scrape', but Barry paid no heed.

The warning came too late. Already Dr Barry had stirred up more trouble in Cape Town by efforts to improve the lot of the lepers and the prisoners. Soon after her appointment as Colonial Medical Inspector she had asked the Governor if the inspection of the Leper Institute, the Tronk (the Town Prison) and Robben Island (where the convicts were confined) might be added to her other duties, though without pay, except for 600 rixdollars salary as Superintendent of the Leper Institution. On permission being granted she lost no time in getting to work.

It was in July 1823 that the first of the complaints about Dr Barry—so soon to become a steady stream—had reached Lord Charles Somerset: the manager of the Leper Institution, Mr Leitner, threatened to resign rather than take orders from Dr Barry. Mr Leitner saw himself as one who had 'sacrificed all the comforts of Society' to carry out His Excellency's 'noble and humane wishes with regard to the unfortunate Lepers'. Dr Barry, obviously, saw him in a somewhat different light. She drew up 'Rules for the General Treatment of the Lepers' which she sent to Mr and



Mrs Leitner for their guidance, and, from the stress laid in these rules on the basic virtues of kindness and cleanliness, the state of the Leper Institution under their management can easily be inferred! 'Good order', wrote Dr Barry,

must be preserved, but no *cruelty* nor deprivation of food must ever be resorted to. The parties must be considered not as convicts but as unfortunate. . . . The strictest attention must be paid to the personal cleanliness of the Lepers, the bedding and clothing must be frequently changed, and they must bathe twice a week at least. . . . The sores must be washed twice daily with tar water and dressed with tar plaister, the old plaister must be thrown away. The School and Church should be encouraged, so should Industry as much as possible.

These 'Rules' also included instructions on diet, a subject to which Dr Barry always paid great attention, and believed to be of the highest importance. She wished all the lepers' meals to be daily inspected by Mr and Mrs Leitner, and their food to be clean and well cooked; 'the diet is of great consequence', she wrote, 'nothing salted such as fish, meat, etc, should be permitted. Milk, rice, vegetables and fruit should be used as much as possible; fresh mutton and soup once daily unless otherwise ordered.' Dr Barry further desired a weekly report, but had to abandon this project when the Governor refused to accept Mr Leitner's resignation as manager of the Institution. The lepers' lot must, nevertheless, have been infinitely happier after Barry's intervention.

For many years Dr Barry had been much concerned about the bad conditions prevailing in the Tronk—the dirt and filth of the cells, the daily floggings—and had written innumerable official letters about them, without result. Fruitlessly she had asked Lord Charles Somerset to visit the prison and see with his own eyes the miserable state of the

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unfortunate prisoners, and it was not until April 1824 that her graphic description of the 'wretched and appalling state' of two of them evoked a response from the Governor.

'My Lord', wrote Dr Barry on 16 April 1824,

I beg leave to state on the evening of the 6th I visited the Tronk in company with Mr Kekewich, and in a dungeon of that place found Jacob Elliott, with his thigh fractured—without clothes, without a bed, or pillows, or blankets, dirty in the extreme, without a single comfort:—and in short exhibiting such a state of misery that if he had not been under the special protection of Providence, he could not have survived. Elliott declared to Mr Kekewich and myself, in the presence of the prison-keeper in attendance (and who did not contradict the facts) 'that he had neither been furnished with medicine nor proper diet, nor attendance so much required in his helpless and painful state—but that *once* in 24 hours the keeper brought him a bucket of water and the common prison allowance, and also, until that very forenoon he had been lying on the bare ground—when he was laid upon a filthy stretcher.

I do here, my Lord, declare that I never witnessed any scene more truly appalling than this. Mr Kekewich went out in disgust. I then asked the keeper if he had any more broken bones; he answered only one, who was a prisoner from Robben Island. I requested the Keeper to conduct me to the patient,—he did so, and in one of the cells I found Jan Krier, as near as possible, in point of humane and proper treatment, in the same predicament with Elliott. The poor wretch had one of his legs fractured, and the other carefully surrounded with a heavy chain.

This time Lord Charles took instant action, and although he made no comment on the Fiscal's defence—'that the Government would not suffer any expenses to be incurred for prisoners'—he ordered both prisoners to be removed to



hospital and, later, a sick bay was provided at the prison. Committees were also appointed to report upon conditions at the Tronk and the Town Hospital, so that Dr Barry, as a social reformer, must have felt that at last her persistence was being rewarded.

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THE majority of those who have written about Dr Barry portray her as a temperamental, hysterical, probably inefficient, woman who only retained her job as an army surgeon through some mysterious 'influence' in high places, always exerted at the right moment.

In this connection it is interesting to consider the relationship between Lord Charles Somerset and Dr Barry. Lord Charles Somerset was at this time all powerful at the Cape, yet in all the cases which had come before him in 1824 he had shown no favouritism towards Barry. Only in the 'Tronk' case, where the evidence was overwhelming, had Dr Barry got her own way; the Liesching and Leitner cases had definitely gone against her. Yet the very fact that she had dared to oppose Lord Charles with impunity in the Liesching affair showed that she still retained the status, which the Count de Las Cases had observed, 'of a sort of favourite in the Somerset family'.

At first the people of Cape Town laughed at the association, and a quatrain about 'little Dr Barry' went the rounds about a certain Sabbath, when Barry had entered the Dutch Reformed Church at Cape Town, for the service, and left it abruptly on seeing that the Governor's pew was empty:

With courteous devotion inspired,  
Barry came to the temple of prayer.  
But quickly turned round and retired,  
When he found that *his* lord was not there!



But in the summer of 1824, when political tempers were running high and both Dr Barry and Lord Charles had many enemies, there occurred the more dangerous 'affair of the placard'.

About 7 a.m. on Tuesday 1 June, a placard was affixed to one of the posts of the Hout Street bridge where, in those days when there were no newspapers, it was quite usual to hang up unofficial notices, advertisements, etc. This placard was seen and read, to all intents and purposes, by one man only, Captain Findlay, a merchant of Cape Town, who 'found it to be a most disgusting anonymous letter reflecting upon the moral character of Lord Charles Somerset'; it did, in fact suggest an immoral relationship between the Governor and Dr Barry. Captain Findlay saw and read the placard on his way to look for signals of ships approaching the port; a few minutes later, on his return to the house, he found the placard gone, but he reported the matter to the Fiscal, who reported it to the Governor. When the story got about 'a great sensation was excited throughout the town', and on the following day a Proclamation was posted at the Town House offering a reward of 5,000 rixdollars to anyone who could give any information such as should lead to the discovery of the guilty person, and an additional 1,000 rixdollars for the paper itself. Dr Barry offered to increase the award by 1,000 rixdollars, and the merchants of Cape Town, 'horrified and disgusted at such an outrage', subscribed a sum of 1,500 rixdollars. Yet this large reward produced nothing, neither the culprit nor his document. Fortunately, without doing much damage either to Lord Charles or Dr Barry, or to their friendship, the scandal was soon forgotten in the atmosphere of fierce political strife which then enveloped Cape Town.

Conditions in the Colony had changed considerably

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since Lord Charles had taken up office as Governor in 1814, but he had failed to move with the times and to accept the new democracy which the 'Albany settlers'—4,000 English immigrants—had brought with them on their arrival in 1820. This sudden influx had altered the whole balance of population at the Cape, and, what is more, the settlers' leaders were men of intelligence and ability, all imbued with English ideas of justice and freedom, who were quite unprepared to live in a British colony under autocratic rule.

The settlers were discontented, justifiably, with the conditions which they had found awaiting them at the Cape. They were still more discontented when they discovered that the Governor had declared illegal all public meetings held without his sanction, and soon individual settlers began to make their protests.

Mr Bishop Burnett, who had been declared bankrupt and ordered out of his farm, refused to move, and at his trial conducted his own defence. Never before had such language been heard at the Cape: he referred to the 'persecution' he was suffering 'in a Colony where none but the satellites of the Government thrived', and he spoke of the judges as 'persons morally disqualified to fulfill the sacred functions entrusted to them'.

Then the question of the freedom of the press was brought up by Mr Thomas Pringle, who refused to assure the Fiscal that no controversial articles would be published by him in his newspaper the *South African Journal*; rather than give such a promise he ceased publication, which brought the matter into the limelight, and to discussion at the highest level.

Nothing would intimidate these settlers, and the worst of it was that they thought nothing of sending their complaints home. A Memorial, for instance, with 208 signatures, was addressed 'to the King in Council . . . praying for the



extension of the Freedom of the Press to Cape Colony'. Another, bearing 169 signatures, was sent by the settlers to Earl Bathurst at the Colonial Office in London, setting out their grievances. The diary of another settler, who had been wrongfully imprisoned in the Tronk, and described the daily life there in no uncertain terms, was also sent to Earl Bathurst. Questions were asked in the House of Commons, and Parliament had to take action: a Royal Commission, with very wide terms of reference, was set up to enquire 'into the state of the Colonies of the Cape of Good Hope, Mauritius and Ceylon . . . the general administration of government, and the immediate control exercised by the Governor himself, etc.' The Commissioners appointed were Major W. M. G. Colebrooke and Mr John Thomas Bigge, formerly a judge in the West Indies.

In February 1825, Lord Charles Somerset was informed from London that in future he must govern the Colony with the assistance of a Council, as it had been decided that the Government of the Cape should no longer be 'under the control of one man'. Six months later, on 20 August, the Colonial Office divided the civil administration of the Cape into two parts, leaving Lord Charles with only the western half—the death-blow to his autocratic government, the end of his career.

It seems incredible that, at this of all times, Dr Barry, who had no wish to add to the embarrassments of the Governor, should precipitate another crisis over conditions in the Tronk. Yet this is what she did, unwittingly perhaps, but then Dr Barry always did show a certain blind spot towards political issues. With all her wit and brilliance, Barry never seemed to see where her actions were leading, never fully appreciated the reactions of others to her sometimes mordant tongue, her impetuous decisions. The art of



the possible always seemed to elude her—perhaps because she knew she was capable of achieving the impossible, and to the very end of her life she appeared to have a touching faith in a righteous cause bringing its own reward. Often she fought against oppression and injustice, and failed to win recognition for that fight because she had used weapons which rendered even her friends powerless. So it was now.

On 18 August 1825 Dr Barry received an official note from Sir Richard Plasket, the Chief Secretary at the Cape, asking her to visit the Town Prison to examine a sailor there named Aaron Smith, whom Dr Liesching, the Prison doctor, had certified as being 'deranged in his mind'. The Colonial Medical Inspector's recommendation was required in order to obtain the Governor's authority for the prisoner to be 'removed to the Lunatic Asylum in the Town Somerset Hospital, there to be maintained at the expense of the Government on the same terms as the other lunatics'.

Dr Barry carried out the examination and sent in her report to Sir Richard Plasket on 25 August. The report ran as follows:

Sir,

In compliance with the commands of H.E. the Governor I this morning examined Aaron Smith, the supposed lunatic, now confined in the Town Prison. Dr Liesching and the Sheriff Mills were present, and I am decidedly of opinion that Aaron Smith is perfectly sane in mind, and by no means a subject for the Somerset Hospital. Dr Liesching appeared to be of the same way of thinking, but probably H.M.'s Fiscal's application for Aaron Smith's admission into that establishment had been in the spirit of pure charity for the benevolent purpose of having the wounds inflicted upon this poor man by the Dienaars (on the day of his admission into the Tronk) professionally attended to.



Upon speaking with Dr Liesching relative to Smith's case, he said that within the last 4 days he considered him perfectly sane, and indeed during the whole of his confinement he did not think it necessary to give him a single dose of Physic, or to make any alteration in his diet from the common prison allowance, and only directed solitary confinement. I think it expedient to enter into this detail for the purpose of explaining that the absence of vinous and spirituous liquors was sufficient to restore Smith to his senses, such as they are.

(Signed) James Barry. M.D.

Dr Barry knew that the Liesching affair, only six months previously, had left her on the worst of terms with both Sir Richard Plasket and with Mr Denyssen, the Fiscal, and to make the insinuation that the Fiscal, who was in charge of the prison, was unable to prevent his own men, the Diennaars, from ill-treating the prisoners was, to say the least, foolish, excusable only by reason of the blazing resentment which injustice and cruelty always aroused in her. But here Dr Barry had made two miscalculations; she underestimated the power of the Fiscal, and she failed to realize the antagonism of Sir Richard Plasket. Not that anyone, indeed, could have foreseen Plasket's next move, which was to hand this letter (which was, after all, a report written for his private eye) over to the Fiscal, with a request for a strict enquiry into this 'apparently disgraceful business'.

The Fiscal responded with alacrity, but, even before his reply reached Sir Richard Plasket, Dr Barry had once again been summoned to the prison, as Aaron Smith was now reported 'raving mad'. So Dr Barry examined him again on 12 September, and sent another long letter to Sir Richard, repeating, more or less, her previous diagnosis:

Immediately upon the receipt of your letter of this day's date I visited the Town Prison and examined Aaron Smith,



and I cannot help expressing my surprise at finding him there, as from the conversation I had with Dr Liesching when I before reported Smith's state of health I concluded he must necessarily have been discharged within the ensuing 24 hours. . . . I am of opinion that had the resolution (to discharge him) been carried into effect Smith could not be in his present melancholy state. His situation in the Tronk being of itself sufficient to induce madness in any person whose mind has ever before been affected. I therefore now think him ill and weak, with his mind partially deranged, and consequently a proper subject for the professional treatment of an hospital, altho' not for a lunatic asylum unless he shall hereafter evince symptoms of permanent derangement, which I have not yet observed, nor do I see cause to anticipate.

James Barry. M.D.

As eighteen days had now elapsed since Dr Barry's first report, and no comment had been made on it when she was asked to give the second, she was much surprised to receive on that very day, 12 September, a message from the Fiscal summoning her to appear before the local Court of Justice to be examined respecting her report to the Governor on 25 August. As Dr Barry had made her report to the Governor, at the request of the Governor, she considered that she was answerable only to the Governor; she considered, indeed, that a very important principle was at stake here, and refused to attend the Court of Justice. Dr Barry treated the message with contempt, 'he threw the translation of the summons, that had been handed to him by his servant, into the messenger's hat, having previously torn it in pieces' and he 'threatened to cut off the Fiscal's ears with his sword'!

There can be no doubt that Dr Barry then embarked upon a course of extremely provocative behaviour. She did



not attend the court to which she had been summoned, and although (having received a second summons threatening her with imprisonment in the event of non-appearance) she did appear on 15 September, she refused to take an oath in that Court, or to answer any questions put to her; she listened nonchalantly to a long speech from the Fiscal, again threatening imprisonment, and at the end of it a letter was handed to her—surely by pre-arrangement—requesting her immediate attendance ‘on the lady of Colonel Somerset who was indisposed’. The Court, in the circumstances, had perforce to adjourn until the following day. As Dr Barry still refused to give evidence, and still ‘denied the power of H.M. Fiscal to put in his official capacity any question relative to the report sent to the Government’, a decree of imprisonment was issued. The sentence was not implemented; on representations being made to the Governor it was suspended and eventually set aside, but not through any misdirected ‘influence’.

The summoning of the Court had, apparently, excited ‘great disgust’ and caused much discussion in Cape Town as to its ‘legality’, and to put Dr Barry into prison on a charge which, however well it was framed, was one concerning an official’s confidential report to the Governor, was about the last thing Lord Charles Somerset wanted to do, just when the English Parliament was taking much too lively an interest in all his actions. Mr Bishop Burnett, that dissatisfied emigrant, had by now returned to London and placed a petition before the House of Commons, and leave of absence had already been granted to Lord Charles, so that he might come home to meet in person the charges which were being brought against him.

It says much for Lord Charles that, at this moment of crisis in his own affairs, he should have spent so much time



in trying to help Dr Barry. He saw her on the day after her appearance in Court, and listened to the reasons she gave for her actions: 'I declined answering any questions', said Dr Barry, 'arising out of a Report ordered to be made by Government, as tending to introduce a dangerous principle by shackling its powers and preventing public Officers from stating in their Reports facts which they conceive ought to be brought to the cognizance of your Excellency.'

If even Lord Charles could not shake Dr Barry on this matter of principle he did what he could to make her modify her language and epistolary style, and succeeded in making her withdraw some letters:

On more than one instance Dr Barry has written officially in terms so indecorous and inadmissible that had I not (from my personal regard for him) pressed upon him the necessity of withdrawing his communications, I should have been compelled to have noticed them, in a manner most unpleasant to my feelings and disadvantageous to him.

Lord Charles, even so, could not stop Dr Barry engaging in bitter argument with Sir Richard Plasket, who, on 30 September, sent another official and chilly note:

His Excellency desires me to say that what ever appearance there may have been of the ill-treatment of Aaron Smith, or of the probability of such ill-treatment having been occasioned by the misconduct of one of the Dienaars, H.E. cannot refrain from remarking on the very great impropriety of your indulging yourself in reflections on the character of H.M. Fiscal—reflections which were quite irrelevant to the investigations.

Poor Aaron Smith, the cause of all the trouble, whether he was a madman or merely drunk and disorderly, was rapidly being forgotten in the larger issues involved; presumably in the Somerset Hospital his wounds were healing!



Dr Barry—so clear she felt her conscience, so just her cause—now decided, ill-advisedly as events were to prove, to ask the Royal Commissioners (Major Colebrooke and Mr Bigge, who were now at work in Cape Town) to investigate her case. She therefore called upon Sir Richard Plasket and asked him for the documents from the Court, which she wished to place before the Commissioners. Sir Richard, who at first refused to see Barry, lost his temper when he heard this request—naturally he did not wish yet another legal enquiry to take place in Cape Town—and answered threateningly: ‘If you do, you shall be dismissed from your situation, and I will recommend it’, to which Dr Barry replied: ‘Indeed, Sir, now you have threatened, I will do so, not as a matter of complaint but for their opinion and investigation, as well as for my own edification.’

The decision had been made: the ‘Case of Dr Barry’, as carefully considered by the Commissioners, is now a fat volume on the shelves of the Public Record Office. But, before the investigation could begin, Dr Barry, who persisted in under-estimating Sir Richard Plasket as an adversary, had, in her stiff-necked way, written another letter to him on 3 October, protesting that she was not aware that in her report she had ‘attacked the character or reflected upon any neglect of duty on the part of H.M. Fiscal’, adding that had she not reported the bruises and wounds on the person of Smith, said to have been inflicted by the Dienaars, she would have esteemed herself unfit for her station. Plasket, making this letter his excuse, sent this reply:

Sir,

The contents of your letter of yesterday’s date, added to other circumstances which have lately passed with reference to your duties as Colonial Medical Inspector have impressed upon H.E. the Governor the impropriety of any one Individual



being entrusted with the sole management and control of the Colonial Medical Department here, and he has therefore felt it necessary to propose to Council that the duties of that Department be henceforth carried on by a Committee according to the original intention of the Colonial Government in 1807, when the Supreme Medical Committee was appointed.

Richard Plasket

Sir Richard had delved into the archives, found the old Memorial of the Merchant Importers, found precedents for his action, and turned them to his own purpose. This was serious, but even now Dr Barry did not realize how serious, and she replied that she was willing to conform to any arrangements the Council might deem necessary for the conduct of the Department of the Colonial Medical Inspector, although she could not understand why such changes should have resulted from her letter of 3 October. Dr Barry was still quite confident in the strength of her position as Colonial Medical Inspector; not a single complaint had been made about the conduct of her Department, nor had there been any investigation into her own work there. In short, there were no grounds for her dismissal, and it is quite clear that she had never suspected that she would not be the officer in charge of the new Department. But, together, the Fiscal and Sir Richard had been more subtle than she.

It was allowed to reach her by local rumour, a last indignity, that she was to be a humble member, not the President, of the new Committee, and finally Sir Richard Plasket gave himself the pleasure of confirming the rumour: 'We', he said to Dr Barry, 'intend giving you a seat on *our* Committee.' A very junior seat it was to be, too, as James Barry, M.D., was still only an Assistant-Surgeon to the



Forces, and two of the members of the proposed new Committee were senior officers. It seems incredible that any one should have expected Dr Barry to accept a subordinate post after three years as head of the Department. The suggestion must have been a great blow to her, and she wrote at once to the Governor that she would refuse to serve on a Committee so constituted.

The matter had now really passed out of Lord Charles's hands, and his reply was perhaps written more in sorrow than in anger:

In answer to your letter I feel it necessary to state to you what has precisely taken place with regard to the Medical Inspectorship.

The very improper language in which you couched your official communications, and the imputations you unsparingly and unreservedly cast upon officers of this Government so greatly embarrassed the Government that Sir Richard Plasket felt it his duty to submit to me the expediency of restoring the Medical Committee. I observed that it would be entirely beneficial, and that the only obstacle was my apprehension that it might hurt your feelings, as Dr Arthur must be a member, and as you were a military officer, of course he must take place of you.

The Council met on 28 October 1825, and the next day Dr Barry was informed by Sir Richard Plasket of the abolition of the office of Colonial Medical Inspector, and of the establishment of a Supreme Medical Committee of which she would be one of the junior members. Swiftly she declined the offer, and also resigned all her other civil appointments.

Nevertheless there was still hope in Dr Barry's heart. Surely, when the Report of the Commissioners was published, she would be restored to her position, if not as

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Colonial Medical Inspector, at least as President of the new Medical Committee. Meanwhile there was nothing to be done but wait while Major Colebrooke and Mr Bigge slowly and carefully weighed the evidence which was put before them. Their task was made the more difficult because, although Dr Barry had now been virtually dismissed from her post, there were absolutely no complaints of any sort about her for them to consider. With the exception of young Liesching's complaint that Barry had refused to examine him, and the case of Aaron Smith, which had caused all the trouble, they could find nothing against her. They did, however, consider these two cases very carefully.

In the Liesching case they expressed 'their firm belief' that Dr Barry's reasons for rejecting the certificates 'were of a very conscientious nature . . . proceeding from a wish to preserve inviolate a rule of administration that the usage of 20 years had, in his opinion, established'.

In the case of Aaron Smith the Commissioners were more guarded. It was possible that Dr Barry might have been mistaken in the first diagnosis; it was also possible, they said, that the man's bruises might have been inflicted before he entered the Tronk—although they admitted that they were 'well aware that the conduct of the Dienaars and constables towards the Prisoners even out of the Prison would justify the epithets that Dr Barry has applied to them'. Finally, although they considered 'that the ironical and contemptuous expression in which Dr Barry reflects upon the Fiscal's motives was one that deserved the severest reprobation', yet they could not defend the Chief Secretary's action in handing Dr Barry's letter over to the Fiscal, an action which, they thought, 'could only tend to irritate the feelings of that gentleman against Dr Barry'.



In actual fact the Commissioners were discovering, as Dr Barry had discovered, just how difficult a man was the Chief Secretary, Sir Richard Plasket. He proved an unreliable witness when they wished to confirm the details of his all-important interview with Barry, and his correspondence with them on the subject became so unpleasant that, as they explained in a confidential report to Earl Bathurst, it 'led to a suspension of the amicable intercourse that till then had subsisted between us'.

There seems no doubt that the sympathy of the Commissioners was with Dr Barry. They pointed out that the Colonial Medical Inspector's relations with Sir Richard Plasket's predecessors had been good, and that Barry's professional talents and reputation were universally acknowledged, 'and by no person more emphatically than by Lord Charles Somerset and the members of his family'. In their view 'no exertion, professional or personal has been spared by Dr Barry to render his services useful to the Community', and 'his integrity and zeal to bring about the reform of abuses' should have been weighed by the Council against the charges which they brought of 'want of temper and discretion'. Furthermore they considered 'that it was incumbent upon the Council to have examined the state of his Department', for they had discovered with some surprise that this was a point never discussed by the Council before their abolition of the office! In regard to the new Supreme Medical Committee, 'we think', said Major Colebrooke and Mr Bigge,

that such arrangements should have been made in the constitution of the new Board as he might have been able to accept without a tarnish of his professional reputation or a positive loss of income.

And they added:



No practical difference exists between the acts of removing an Individual from an office, or of abolishing that office and its emoluments, and then offering a subordinate one without emolument which he could not accept without tacit admission of his inferiority or misconduct.

Yet, with all this, the one recommendation that the Commissioners did not make was that Dr Barry should be reinstated as Head of the Department, either as Colonial Medical Inspector or as President of the Committee. They had realized that, given the personalities involved and Barry's temperament, such a reinstatement simply would not work.

During the investigations Dr Barry had maintained an absolute silence. She had, she said, 'a sincere and ardent wish to do nothing that could in any way injure Lord Charles Somerset'. She always hoped against hope that when the report was published (which it was on 14 March 1826) her post would be returned to her. Not until December 1825, when she must have known that the Commissioners had collected all their evidence, when she had, perhaps, begun to have some doubts as to the final issue, did she write to the Commissioners:

At a moment when my Department was under your consideration and until such was completed, I deemed it unfitting that I should make any move, as on your unprejudiced and impartial Report I confidently rely for the restoration to my Office, or at least to be replaced at the Head of my Department.

She asked permission—'apprehending that ex-parte statements' might be made about the case—to write direct to Earl Bathurst in London, 'praying to be restored' as Head of the Department. This permission was granted, and on 6 December 1825, Dr Barry wrote a long letter to Lord Bathurst telling the whole story, but still impenitent about the fatal comment on the Fiscal:



And there was the turn of an expression in my report which report I contend was absolutely necessary for the public good, in as much as it tended to ensure the safety of prisoners from wanton brutality, and it brought such proceedings to the notice of His Excellency, this, I say, was made the pretence for abolishing my office and totally destroying my hardly earned and hitherto highly estimated professional character and blighting my fair prospects in life. . . . Thus in the midst of public and important duties, scarcely yet completed, I was disgracefully virtually dismissed from my office—and I must here repeat, to the utter ruin of my professional character and prospects in life—as to the temporary inconvenience of pecuniary matters, I have not, I do not, give them a thought. I had indeed flattered myself that I was bartering my Time, my Health, and my Talents (such as they are) to the Public Benefit—for Honest Fame—not sacrificing them to Infamy.

Still dogged by her lack of political acumen, Dr Barry could not yet understand how utterly impossible she had made her position at the Cape. So what she called the 'death-blow' to her hopes, when it came, was all the more crushing. In November 1826, Dr Barry received a letter written in London in the previous June (such was the course of post in those days) informing her that 'Earl Bathurst sees no reason to doubt the propriety of the arrangement which has been recently made by the Governor of the Cape for vesting in a Medical Board the execution of the duties which had previously been assigned to the Colonial Medical Inspector'.

From this decision there was really no appeal, but Dr Barry, in desperation, did write again in November, still hoping to receive from Earl Bathurst 'that redress which an injured man has a right to expect at his hands'.

It is needless for me to enforce how dear, how very dear to me, my good name is, and how very anxious I am to make



every human effort in order to avert the heavy calamities consequent to the loss of it. I therefore deem it my bounden duty to vindicate my integrity and to rescue it as soon as possible from the unworthy imputations which have been heaped upon it; and to manifest my honourable transactions to the World—without which even my claims to and anxious expectations of military promotion may continue to be obstructed, if not totally annihilated.

To this Dr Barry received no reply. Earl Bathurst had given his verdict, irrevocably. This time no help could be expected from Lord Charles Somerset; he had left the Cape on 5 March 1826 to go to London to appear before the House of Commons. There Mr Bishop Burnett's petition had again been brought forward, and, a little later, Mr Lombe, M.P. for Arundel, gave notice of a motion which was practically an impeachment of the Governor. The House assembled in anticipation of an exciting evening, but, fortunately perhaps for Lord Charles, Mr Lombe at the critical moment failed to appear, and so the debate took a much less acrimonious turn, and Lord Charles left the House 'without a stain upon his character'. He had, however, ceased to be a power in South African politics, and the following year, in April 1827, he resigned the Governorship of Cape Colony and went into retirement in England.

Seven months later, on 22 November 1827, Dr James Barry was promoted to the rank of Staff-Surgeon to the Forces. So, after all, those 'expectations of military promotion' had neither been 'obstructed' nor 'annihilated' by the unfortunate events of the previous year. There was little reason why they should have been. Dr Barry had neither been dismissed nor convicted, and the Commissioners had done their best throughout their Report to stress that Dr Barry had 'professional talents of the highest order'.



Dr Barry was probably still too near to her misfortunes in point of time to realize how successful her stand against cruelty and injustice had been, when taken in conjunction with the protests of the settlers. Reforms, following the Report of the Royal Commission, took place not only in the prisons and hospitals, but also in the whole judicial system of the Cape. A Charter of Justice, which received the Royal Assent on 24 August 1827, established a Supreme Court in Cape Town, as well as Circuit Courts, it laid down qualifications required by practising barristers and by judges; trial by jury was introduced, and the office of Attorney-General was created. No longer was such rough justice administered as had been encountered by Dr Barry, and, by a stroke of dramatic irony, the office of Fiscal was abolished, and Mr Daniel Denyssen, LL.D., was summarily dismissed, at first without a pension, but application to Whitehall did finally procure for him 'a small one'.

Lord Charles was succeeded at the Cape by Major-General Bourke, and the Somerset régime gradually became a memory of the past. Dr Barry, too, soon received marching orders. On 8 October 1828 she left Cape Town; after a farewell dinner given in her honour at George's Hotel she sailed for her new post as staff-surgeon to the garrison of Mauritius. Dr Barry was now thirty-three, and had spent twelve years in the Colony; as she sailed away from Cape Town she must have known that she was saying farewell to her youth, and looked with sadness at the receding shores where, in spite of the recent bitterness, she had spent so many happy years. No wonder that her ghost, clad in the Georgian uniform of a young officer, still haunts Camp's Bay, or did until a few years ago, when old nannies would tell their charges that if they were naughty 'Dr Barry's ghost would catch them'!

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## VI

✓ AFTER her experience at the Cape, Dr Barry would surely have been well advised to avoid conflict with another Colonial Governor; but in 1828 she was as impetuous and headstrong as ever, especially where her own personal dignity was concerned, and within a few weeks of her arrival in Mauritius she was writing to the Governor, Sir Charles Colville, claiming the right to be appointed Senior Military Medical Officer. Apparently what had happened was that the Chief Civil and Military Medical Officer, Dr McMullen, had been granted leave of absence, and a Dr Shanks had been appointed Civil Medical Officer in his place. Presumably no appointment had been made on the military side, but unfortunately no more of this correspondence has been preserved, and the outcome remains obscure. The Governor may have exerted a calming influence.

More dangerous to Dr Barry's peace of mind might have been the presence on the island of one of the famous Lawrence family, Mrs Fenton, who, on her way from India to New South Wales with her husband, had had to break her journey at Mauritius because of the imminent birth of her baby. Now Mrs Fenton was at that time keeping a diary, and in it she recorded the fact, which, luckily, she did not gossip about on the island, that she had already heard of Dr Barry from a nurse whom she had met in Calcutta. That fact may have been recorded in 1829, or it may have been inserted later, for Mrs Fenton's *Journal* was not published



until 1901, and the author had outlived Dr Barry by ten years, so, like Lord Albemarle's autobiography, a certain suspicion must surround it. The nurse's story, as told by Mrs Fenton, is a very intriguing one:

She said she had been driven from the Cape by Dr Barry, over whom there hung some extraordinary mystery. She was in high repute there, and often engaged where Dr Barry attended. One night when she supposed a lady she was with to be in want of immediate aid, she sent for him—he slept in the house—but not being so expeditious as she wished, she ran herself and made an unceremonious entrance into his room. Thereon he flew into a most violent passion. She declares and steadily maintains, that the nominal Dr Barry *was* and *is a woman*. From this time he displayed the most implacable dislike to her, even to making it a condition not to attend in any family where she was employed. The truth of this strange tale I cannot pledge myself to uphold, but well I remember listening to it one tedious night, when I very little expected to come in contact with the individual concerned.

'And', added Mrs Fenton, 'there is something extraordinary about this same Dr Barry.'

Mrs Fenton did not, however, let this prevent her from making friends with Dr Barry, whom she allowed to accompany her on walks round the island. 'I shall just put Flora in a basket', she wrote on 7 June 1829, 'and set off on a pedestrian tour of the island with my friend Dr Barry.' The baby, Flora, was then two months old, and her birth had been a cause of much concern at Government House where Mrs Fenton had been left to have her confinement. At the critical moment Mrs Fenton's doctor, Dr Shanks, was absent on another case, and her nurse, realizing that her duties were not going to be easy, 'went to the mess of



the 29th' and returned with the Regimental Assistant-Surgeon, Dr Robinson. He was a young man, obviously unskilled in midwifery, and after some hours he called in Dr Hart, his Staff-Surgeon, and the child was successfully delivered at 4 a.m. on 3 April. Mrs Fenton was convinced that she owed her life to Dr Hart, and was grateful for all the steps that had been taken to help her at such a moment of crisis. Not so Staff-Surgeon Barry. Dr Barry disapproved, on principle, of military surgeons indulging in private practice, and thought that she had caught Hart and Robinson in flagrant delinquency. According to Mrs Fenton, Dr Barry charged them with being 'engaged in private practice to the detriment of their hospital patients', and the Governor had to set up a Court of Inquiry to investigate the matter, Mrs Fenton's nurse appearing as a witness to prove that both the regimental surgeons were off duty when she called them. The result was that they were completely exonerated, and there 'was some notice of removal to Dr Barry'. It certainly does seem extraordinary that Dr Barry had learnt so little from experience, and had so little sense of self-preservation, that here again, and within so short a time, she should take the risk of becoming an embarrassment to yet another Governor.

The friendship between Mrs Fenton and the doctor was not of long duration. Mrs Fenton was waiting for a ship to take her on to New South Wales as soon as she could travel with the baby, and Dr Barry sailed for England on 27 August, 1829.

This was the famous occasion on which Staff-Surgeon Barry came home without leave. The tale occurs in various forms in almost every article ever written about Barry, sometimes so much exaggerated as to make it appear that this method of return was habitual. Dickens realized to the



full its dramatic possibilities when he wrote in *All the Year Round* (1867) his graphic description of Dr Barry's interview with the Director-General, Sir James McGrigor:

Dr James would chuckle as he related the story of his unlooked-for reappearance before the director-general of the medical department in London. 'Sir,' said the director, 'I do not understand your reporting yourself in this fashion. You admit you have returned without leave of absence. May I ask you how this is?'

'Well,' said James, coolly running his long white fingers through his crisp sandy curls, 'I have come home to have my hair cut!'

Many different reasons have been given for this sudden home-coming. One version of the story, perhaps the most probable, is that Dr Barry demanded that the Senior Medical Officer (Dr McMullen?) should withdraw an adverse report upon her which was about to be sent to the Horse Guards (and which she had had read to her before despatch) describing her all too truly as 'somewhat unfortunate in manner, lacking in tact and impatient of control'. When this demand was refused, Dr Barry, 'in direct defiance of the orders of his superior officer took immediate passage for England'. This seems to bear the stamp of truth because the War Office's record of Dr Barry's service shows that Barry wrote a letter to the Horse Guards at this time which was carefully filed, as was an earlier letter from Dr McMullen, but both these letters have now unfortunately disappeared. Dr Barry also put it on record that she only once, in all her years of service, obtained leave of absence for private reasons, 'and then only when I conceived my prospects in the service were seriously compromised for want of a personal appeal at Head Quarters', which tallies well with these circumstances.

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All the same, that may be only a half-truth, for in the very Memorandum in which these words appear Dr Barry states specifically that after eighteen months in Mauritius she was 'recalled in consequence of the serious illness of Lord Charles Somerset'. It is perhaps reasonable to doubt if 'recalled' is here quite the correct term. Quite possibly Dr Barry, embroiled already with Dr McMullen, simply decided, on hearing of Lord Charles's illness, at all costs to catch the first boat home. If that is what actually happened, it might well be one of the most feminine actions in Dr Barry's career.

There is no doubt that on 13 December 1829, when Dr Barry arrived in London, Lord Charles Somerset was already gravely ill, and, if he had expressed the desire to have his old private physician with him till the end, strings may have been pulled to grant his request, as his brother, Lord Fitzroy Somerset, was at that time Military Secretary to the Horse Guards, a highly influential position. Staff-Surgeon Barry was certainly not court-martialled, and, although her official 'record of service' throws little light upon what actually happened, it is easy to understand that she would not willingly have left the side of so great a friend until he had passed beyond her aid. It cannot be mere coincidence that Lord Charles Somerset died at Brighton on 20 February 1831, and that it was not until 19 April 1831 that Dr Barry left England to take up her next appointment as Staff-Surgeon to the garrison of Jamaica.



## VII

IN the early years of the nineteenth century, the voyage to Jamaica took about six to eight weeks, so that Dr Barry did not arrive there until 13 June 1831. A new chapter in her life was opening, an old one had closed for ever. Never again would she be on terms of such intimacy with anyone as she had been with Lord Charles Somerset; never again would she meet such a benefactor as the Earl of Buchan, who had died in April 1829. Once more Dr Barry had to face the world alone, and although the fiery temper would never be mastered, nor the fierce intolerance of cruelty and injustice subdued, yet some lessons had been learned from her experiences at the Cape; during the four years she spent in Jamaica she concentrated solely on her professional work. It was indeed one of the few spells of duty in her somewhat tempestuous career in which she did not come into conflict with those in authority.

Dr Barry was now, if we accept the figure given on the death certificate as correct, at least thirty-six years of age, with a very definite routine. A teetotaller, drinking nothing but water, and a strict vegetarian, 'at dinner he ate fruit or vegetables which he had first soaked thoroughly in water in order to remove, as he informed his friends, the "animalculae" upon them'. The doctor was still attended by the black servant and followed by a little dog, almost always, as generation succeeded generation, called 'Psyche', who consumed her master's daily ration of meat. This strange bodyguard may have been a wise form of protection; the



habit had begun at the Cape and continued till death, a black servant, indeed, was with Barry in London at the last. No doubt seems to have arisen in the West Indies as to her sex, for the story is told of an officer in Jamaica who objected to the little doctor visiting his wife during the hours when he himself was absent in the orderly room!

Like Mrs Fenton, Dr Barry's new companions may have considered her somewhat 'extraordinary' but they quickly accepted her, probably enjoyed her witty conversation, and she was, of course, fully capable of performing all the duties required of a Staff-Surgeon. The Jamaica garrison was not very large; in 1831 it was composed mainly of white troops, about 3,000 men, with a few black pioneers attached to each regiment for fatigue duties, and a small detachment of the West India Regiment. The men were not concentrated in Spanish Town, the capital, but distributed all over the island, in barracks many of which seemed almost to have been chosen for their swampy, or otherwise unhygienic situation. No wonder that the Jamaica station had gained a reputation for 'extreme insalubrity'!

There were eight military hospitals for Dr Barry to visit, four on the north side and four on the south side of the island. These hospitals were small, pleasant, two-storeyed buildings, attached to the barracks, and usually had two wards for patients and accommodation for officers, surgeries, etc. They were very rarely empty, as fever, 'remittent fever', was almost endemic; a contemporary medical report stated that, on an average, each man had an attack of it every sixteen months, and as one attack secured no immunity from a second, it was 'extremely fatal'.

Before Dr Barry had been more than a couple of months in Jamaica there was an epidemic of fever at Stoney Hill, a military post about nine miles from Kingston. This outbreak



in August 1831 was of such severity there that 'all classes were alike affected, and the proportion of deaths to admissions was about 1 in 4'. The epidemic lasted for nearly three months, but in October, when the damp fogs had cleared away, it, too, gradually disappeared. Owing to the excellence of the medical attention, only one-seventh of the garrison had died, a result which was considered gratifying.

After the remarkably healthy conditions of the Cape, Staff-Surgeon Barry must have found promise of interesting professional experience in the maladies of Jamaica, but hardly had she had time to recover from her labours at the fever-stricken Stoney Hill camp than she found herself, for the first time, on active service, as she claimed in her official 'record of service'.

On Tuesday 27 December 1831 there started in Jamaica, in the parish of Trelawney, the 'Negroes' Insurrection', when nine-tenths of the whole slave population refused to turn out to work. It is unnecessary to discuss here at any length the vexed question of the abolition of slavery which was the crux of the matter. Although the Parliament at Westminster was trying to deal with the problem, the Jamaican legislature was not equally enlightened, and even refused to adopt an Order in Council concerned only with amelioration of existing conditions. The Jamaican sugar-planters were, almost to a man, behind this policy, and held public meetings all over the island in order to ventilate their grievances. This, as one historian has put it, 'was about as safe as playing with fire-works in a powder magazine'. The slaves knew all about these meetings, but got the arguments wrong. They believed that the Act for their actual emancipation had already been passed in London, and that only their tyrannical masters, the sugar-



planters, stood between them and their freedom, withholding it from them for their own purposes. This dangerous misconception was encouraged by demagogues who, like the planters, did not realize that they were playing with dynamite. The 'passive resistance' demonstration which was staged by the slaves' leaders on 27 December was not intended to be more than what would today be known as a strike; no harm was meant to the planters. But, before the day was over, some of the slaves broke into a rum store, and, hopelessly drunk, set fire to the property. Thereafter, 'the devil got into their heads' and they set fire to all the mansion houses and sugar works in the vicinity; by nightfall the whole horizon, as seen from Montego Bay, was 'for miles lighted up with a strong lurid glare'.

It should not, at this point, have been difficult to suppress the rising, but things went wrong, very badly wrong. Owing to the difficult nature of the country in this corner of the island—it was mountainous and densely wooded as well as unhealthy—the white troops did not occupy permanent stations. The onus, therefore, of dealing with the rising fell on a regiment of militia, composed of planters, under the command of one of themselves, Colonel Gignon. He was afterwards court-martialled, as all that he did was to retreat before the rebels until, by 29 December, he and his men had reached Montego Bay, leaving the whole intervening country in the hands of the slaves.

On 1 January 1832, regular troops, under Sir Willoughby Cotton, were landed at Montego Bay and, although the going was slow, owing to the difficult nature of the ground, they had the situation well in hand at the end of five days. Martial law, of a rather rough and ready kind when administered by the planters' militia, remained in force until 8 February, with many executions taking place



every day, and it was estimated that 400 rebels had lost their lives in the course of the rising. The material loss sustained by the white planters was heavy, 160 properties burned to the value of about £800,000, but, considering that 50,000 slaves had been involved in the rising, the loss of life among the white population was small, 'ten killed, two murdered, and one or two burned in houses'.

Dr Barry had landed at Montego Bay with the troops under the command of Sir Willoughby Cotton. Her first duty, after giving attention to the few wounded, was to re-open the garrison hospital which, together with the barracks, had been closed for some time, owing to 'their extreme unhealthiness'. As the Montego Bay post was almost entirely encircled by mountains it was one of the hottest places on the island, and, after the re-opening in 1832, it lived up to its reputation for 'insalubrity': in that year, out of a strength of 123 men, 44 died.

Unfortunately, due to the state of emergency following the Insurrection, more white troops had to be sent to the north and east of the island to protect the inhabitants, and many other old and unhealthy stations, like Montego Bay, had to be opened up, with consequent heavy mortality from fever among the troops. It must have been heart-breaking for Dr Barry, and the reports from these outposts still make pitiful reading:

*Buff's Bay*: seven deaths out of a strength of 25 in a month, and the rest of the detachment then withdrawn owing to the sickly state to which they had been reduced.

*Manchioneal*: every individual attacked by fever, at the period of their removal not a man left for duty.

*Chapelton*: 14 deaths in 6 months; the rest so debilitated by their sufferings that scarcely a man was able to march from his quarters.



The story is the same for the other four posts, and later on, when they had been closed and the troops withdrawn, a report was sent to Sir James McGrigor giving the statistics of sickness and mortality, with a recommendation that these positions should not be re-occupied in a similar emergency, as they could never 'be garrisoned by European troops without a great sacrifice of life'.

It was fortunate for the sugar planters that the negroes made no attempt at a second insurrection. Gradually life in Jamaica became tranquil again, and the slaves received their freedom by an Act of Parliament of 1833 which became operative in August 1834. Dr James Barry's knowledge of the island, however, was limited to the years of stress and strain. Early in 1835 she sailed for England on leave—leave this time officially granted, and well deserved.



## VIII

AFTER rather more than a year's leave, Dr Barry received orders to go to St Helena as Principal Medical Officer of the island. This was promotion, and showed that Barry had found favour in the eyes of Sir James McGrigor, Director-General of the Army Medical Department.

Sir James McGrigor prided himself upon his personal and individual knowledge of the officers under his command. Intimating that 'the higher qualifications any individual possessed the better chance he would have of promotion', he made every medical officer in the Army draw up and sign a full statement of his education and services. 'I exerted myself', he tells us in his *Autobiography*, 'to gain the confidence of each medical officer, and while by every means I showed myself their friend and used the utmost courtesy to the good officer, I was severe and unrelenting to the bad, the negligent and the ignorant who were averse to learn.'

Sir James had been appointed to the post of Director-General at the end of the Napoleonic war, after his good work for Wellington in the Peninsula. He had now held the office for fourteen years, and had instituted many reforms in his Department; he had evolved a system of Annual Reports to be submitted by the heads of the medical staff at all the colonial stations, 'detailing the health and conditions of the troops, the diseases prevalent among them, and the modes of treatment pursued'. It was said of him that, working from these reports, he 'selected judiciously for



heads of the medical staff in each of the colonies those best fitted by previous service and professional ability . . . he considered only ability in his appointment of chiefs of medical staff at stations visited periodically by epidemics'.

He must therefore have chosen Dr Barry, after due deliberation, as the right person for the post, and he gave a very careful briefing. On 27 October 1836 he sent a letter containing most detailed instructions. Dr Barry, said Sir James, would take charge of the General Civil Hospital, paying particular attention to the following points:

(1) Correct accounts must be kept of the 'disbursements on such pauper sick as their parishes pay for, this account to be kept distinct and separate from that of the Military'.

(2) Another account must be kept by the Apothecary, for medicines supplied to those who could afford to pay for them, charging the medicine 'at the regulated Prices, subject to the variations of the Market'.

(3) Requisitions for supplies of medicine and medical stores should be made for estimated periods of eighteen months, always keeping a similar stock in hand. 'Requisitions for the troops must be made separate from those for the Civil Establishment'.

Poor Dr Barry was later to complain bitterly about the demands made by this office work: 'the same number of Returns, reports and other War Office and Medical Board documents', she said, 'were obliged to be transmitted to England (as well Military as Civil) as if there had been a much larger Force in the Command'.

Sir James McGrigor was not a man who left anything to chance. He also, in his letter of 27 October, enclosed a 'Book of Instructions for Regimental & Detachment Hospitals' for Dr Barry's guidance, and also 'General Instructions for Medical Officers, Heads of Staff and others



in charge of Departments' in which the portions applicable to St Helena were 'distinguished by a Red Ink Line in the margin'.

The fact was that, in 1836, St Helena was by no means an easy assignment. The government of the island had two years previously, in 1834, passed to the Crown from the hands of the British East India Company, and the consequent exodus of East India Company officials had produced many problems. All the Company's medical men, for instance, had departed, so that all the sick of the island, civilian as well as military, had to rely for treatment upon army surgeons, of whom there were very few. One of these, Assistant-Surgeon Hopkins, who had been Acting-P.M.O. until Dr Barry's arrival, was also acting, owing to the absolute dearth of doctors, as Health Officer, an onerous post which included the supervision of the quarantine of all vessels entering the port, and St Helena in those days, before the cutting of the Suez Canal, was a very busy shipping station on the main route from Europe to Africa and the Far East, a port of call for about 600 vessels annually.

The East India Company had left other unfortunate legacies behind, which Dr Barry was to discover all too soon, but at the moment of her arrival in the island, on 4 September 1836, the most immediate problem was that of a mysterious epidemic of dysentery, mysterious because it attacked only the non-commissioned officers and men of the garrison. Dr Barry endorsed the views of the regimental surgeons of the 91st Regiment (Assistant-Surgeons Eddie and McLaren) that the disease was largely induced by 'the total want of fresh provisions', and was able to report that a Medical Board on Fresh Provisions (by recommending the import of cattle from the Cape) had changed the

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soldier's daily ration of '1 lb. of salt beef or pork and 1 lb. of bread with 1 pt. Cape Wine' to 'two days' fresh provisions per week, with the privilege of exchanging a portion of their salt meat for fish or vegetables'. Dr Barry's only comment on this, interesting from a teetotaller, was that 'the ration pint of Cape wine had been of eminent utility in counteracting scrophulous Diathesis, having almost the effect of an anti-scorbutic'.

With that extraordinary vigour and vitality springing from abounding good health which so characterized Dr Barry, she had, in less than two months, finished her inspection of her new domain, and, on 29 October, sent in her report to Sir James McGrigor. She had found the Regimental Hospital 'clean and well arranged' with a low mortality rate, and this she attributed to 'the zeal, ability and attention of Asst. Surgeon Eddie', whom she appointed her assistant 'in making up the expenditure and other returns' until the clerk became accustomed to them. Unfortunately conditions were very different in the Civil Hospital. The complication here was the high rate of venereal disease, 'owing to the number of females left destitute on the removal of the East India Company's regiment from the island who were obliged to resort to prostitution for their support'. Notwithstanding this, conditions need not have been as bad as Dr Barry reported them to be:

On my arrival I found a want of arrangement in regard to the Civil Department, more particularly in the disgusting circumstances of male attendants on the female patients—syphilitic and other diseases—and of course the greatest irregularities. I immediately hired a respectable woman of colour as Matron and requested the Military Chaplain to visit the civil side of the hospital as well as the military.



I also lost no time in representing these matters to H.E. Major-General Middlemore, who authorised me to select a Government building close to the Hospital and has directed the Ordnance Dept. to fit it up—one portion for the reception of females, and the other for Maniacs, who are at present in an awfully neglected state.

To Dr Barry this seemed a matter of urgency, and when two months had elapsed and nothing had been done, she wrote again to the Governor:

P.M.O.'s Office, St Helena,  
15 November, 1836.

To H.E. Major-General Middlemore.

Sir,

I have the honour to submit to your Excellency that the number of females affected with Venereal has greatly increased, and the Hospital itself is now actually crowded with the Military & Civil Population. So much so that we shall be at a loss to accommodate even the Troops, in the event of accident, or increase of Disease in the Garrison.

Your Excellency was pleased in September last to sanction that accommodation for the Females (which it is always incorrect to treat in a Military Hospital) should be fitted up by the Ordnance Dept. in a waste Building near the Hospital called the 'Brewery'. And I beg to represent that it is of vital importance to the troops that this building is prepared, or some other arrangements speedily made to remove the Female Sick from the Military Hospital.

I have the honor to be etc,

James Barry

Simultaneously Dr Barry was carrying on a correspondence with the Assistant Commissary-General, Mr F. E. Knowles, who had refused supplies for the Civil Hospital on the grounds that 'the duties of purveyor to that establishment were not comprised in his Commission'. It was the

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first time that Dr Barry had crossed swords with the Army Commissariat or the Army Purveying Department. Soon she found herself in precisely the position in which Miss Florence Nightingale was to find herself some twenty years later, and might well have echoed her words: 'we have to do with men . . . whose only object is to keep themselves out of blame'. 'Officials', writes Florence Nightingale's biographer Mrs Cecil Woodham-Smith, 'were trained not to make trouble, not to spend money, never to risk responsibility', and these words are as true of conditions at St Helena in 1836 as they were of those in the Crimea in 1855. If Dr Barry had had any of the 'influence' attributed to her, if she had had one-tenth of the very powerful 'influence' which Miss Nightingale had behind her, the Gordian knot might have been cut there and then. As it was, Dr Barry tackled the Commissariat single-handed, and succeeded only in being brought before a court-martial.

Dr Barry refused to take the Assistant Commissary-General's 'no' for an answer. She had Sir James McGrigor's 'Instructions', and, as she interpreted them, it was intended that she should obtain supplies for the troops and civilians from the same source, although the accounts should be kept separately. She wrote in a letter to the Assistant Commissary-General:

The expenditure which may exceed the stoppages received is borne by Government as is the case in Regimental hospitals and the same principles ought to be admitted in both in the absence of all instructions to the contrary. . . . I trust these considerations seconded by a desire to promote the good of the Service will prompt you to withdraw further opposition to my requisitions at the least until a reference may be made on the subject.

Mr Knowles, however, was adamant. He had his own



interpretation of his orders, very different from that of Dr Barry:

As the Services which you wish me to undertake as a Duty are strictly of a Civil nature, under the control of the Civil Government, the expenses of which are defrayed not from the Military Chest, but out of the funds of the Colony and as from the nature of my appointment as Principal Commissariat Officer in this Command I can have no control whatever over such expedition, I have again to assure you of my intention to take no part whatever in the performance.

This was more than Dr Barry could stand. As well as personal pique, she may have felt that the honour of the Army Medical Department rested on her shoulders. She had, we may be sure, read with care the red-ink portions of Sir James McGrigor's manual, and on 14 November 1836 she wrote *direct* (an unheard-of thing) to the Secretary of State at the War Office:

My Lord,

I have the honour to solicit your Lordship's attention to Article No 2 of the Instructions of the 28th Feb. 1835 for the management of Hospitals on Foreign Stations and to a correspondence (a copy of which is annexed) which has taken place between the Asst. Commissary-General, Mr Knowles and myself in consequence of his objections to comply herewith.

Your Lordship will observe that in the sequel his objections have been confined to the Hospital placed under my personal charge . . . for the reception of the sick of the civil population of this Island. . . . I could arrive at no other conclusion than that the supplies were to be obtained thro' the Commissariat by Contract, as generally directed in the Regulations above quoted—moreover I have been confirmed therein by finding the Ordnance Dept. here in possession of instructions to provide for the wants of this Establishment equally, but on distinct requisitions from those of the troops.

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It will appear unnecessary to comment on the total absence of all rational objections on the part of the Commissary here to further the ends of the Service in this instance.

I shall therefore take the most efficient means in my power of obtaining the necessary supplies, until favoured by your Lordship's instructions on the subject.

I have, etc,

James Barry

This act of Dr Barry's put her outside the pale in military circles, and on 24 November 1836 she found herself before a General Court Martial (held by order of H.E. Major-General Middlemore, C.B., Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the island of St Helena, presided over by Lt.-Colonel Trelawny, R.A.) to answer a charge preferred against her by Assistant Commissary-General Knowles of

conduct unbecoming the character of an Officer and a Gentleman, in having by a letter dated 14th November, 1836 officially reported direct to the Rt. Hon. the Secretary at War, that the Asst. Commissary-General had objected or had interposed objections to comply with article No 2 of the regulations of 28th Feb. 1835, for the management of Hospitals on Foreign Stations, or words to that effect, which report is opposed to fact and tending greatly to prejudice the professional character of the Asst. Commissary-General in the estimation of the authorities in England.

- ✓ The proceedings dragged on for a fortnight, 'much extraneous and irrelevant matter' having apparently been introduced, as well as 'certain accusations calculated to reflect upon the conduct of the Major-General Commanding, in declining to attend in evidence especially as his evidence did not relate to the charge'.

On 7 December 1836 the findings of the Court were published and Barry was acquitted, released from arrest, and allowed to return to duty:



The Court having maturely weighed and considered the evidence in support of the charge against the prisoner, Dr James Barry, his Defence and the Evidence adduced in support of it, is of opinion that Staff-Surgeon Dr James Barry is not guilty of the charge preferred against him.

The Court find that the Prisoner wrote the letter upon which the charge is founded, but is of opinion that he was justified in so doing, and doth therefore fully and honorably acquit him.

To this verdict Dr Barry appended a triumphant little MS. note:

Subsequent to this Court-Martial the Lords Commissioners of H.M. Treasury ordered the Commissariat Dept. to provide for the Civil Branch of the Hospital by contract the same as for the Military, by which means the Government saved considerably and the patients were better provided for.

Six months later, on 22 June 1837, General Middlemore wrote to Lord Glenelg at the Colonial Office reporting the fitting up of the hospital extension:

The P.M.O. having represented to me that much inconvenience is felt by the admission of the females into the military hospital as tending to the injury of the morals of the military, patients in many cases retarding their recovery, I have called upon the Commanding Engineer to prepare an estimate for adapting an unoccupied public building for the reception of the civil patients (especially females) which will be effected at an outlay of £167—18—4.

It had taken Dr Barry almost a year to rescue the unfortunate women from what she so rightly called the 'disgusting' conditions of the military hospital. But, as at the Cape ten years earlier, she carried through her reforms at the price of making enemies. General Middlemore, Assistant Commissary-General Mr Knowles, and many

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fellow officers were now ranged against her, and she was not content to let well alone. In her desire to receive justice and to see justice done she began a claim for pay due to her—and to other army medical officers—for civil duties.

The situation here was somewhat involved. Our old friends, Major Colebrooke and Mr Bigge, the Royal Commissioners, had investigated conditions at St Helena as well as at the Cape and had recommended that, as long as the temporary arrangement lasted, by which civilians had to be treated at the military hospital, the hospital at Jamestown should be 'placed under charge of an establishment of medical officers composed of:

1 Staff Surgeon	£274— 5—0
Forage (for his horse)	38—12—
1 Asst. Surgeon (to act as Health Officer)	182—10—
1 Apothecary	91— 5—'

At the end of September 1836, Dr Barry and her staff, Assistant-Surgeon Hopkins and Mr Apothecary Courtney, received pay on this scale. Dr Barry, in fact, held a receipt for a sum of £24 4s. 10d., counter-signed and approved by General Middlemore, for pay due from 4—30 September 1836, at the rate of £274 5s. per annum plus the forage allowance.

It is just conceivable that the payments might have gone on indefinitely had not Dr Barry once more, with her usual reforming zeal, made herself an 'embarrassment to the Government'. Like Sir Richard Plasket at the Cape, the outraged Assistant Commissary-General, Mr Knowles, had begun to look back into the records, and he was soon able to point out to the Governor that these medical officers should never have been paid anything over and above their pay, and must now be asked to 'refund the overplus'. On



28 October 1836, precisely when Dr Barry was making her first complaints, General Middlemore wrote to Lord Glenelg, at the Colonial Office, explaining the 'grievous error' into which he had fallen in making this over-payment, and asking for a ruling for the future.

Between official and postal delays it took the Treasury over eighteen months to come to a decision in the matter, and during that time much happened in St Helena. In November 1837, Assistant-Surgeon Hopkins, worn out by overwork and worry, had received permission to return to Europe 'on urgent private affairs' although the Governor doubted whether, in his poor state of health, he would ever reach England. His going left the post of Health Officer vacant and necessitated changes among the medical staff.

Dr Barry received permission from the O.C. 91st Regiment to appoint Dr McLaren, Assistant-Surgeon of that regiment, as Assistant-Surgeon at the Civil Hospital, without pay, of course, and in addition to his duties with his own regiment and the Royal Artillery. Fortunately Dr McLaren was considered to be 'a very active and zealous young man'. No army surgeon came out from England to replace Assistant-Surgeon Hopkins, as the Governor had assured the Colonial Office that the whole duties of the medical establishment could be conducted by the two regimental surgeons attached to the 91st Regiment, assisted by the Apothecary, Mr Courtney, an arrangement which had the additional merit of effecting a considerable financial economy.

Meanwhile a civil medical practitioner had arrived at, or rather returned to, St Helena, one Reed by name, a man of about sixty who had spent twelve years in the island as Assistant-Surgeon in the service of the East India Company. Thankful, probably, to find him, the Governor appointed

him Health Officer. He should receive a certain amount. Very soon after his appointment the Health Officer, except the bitterest of the Reed since he held the situation seriously ill. The passenger objected to 'to charge' passenger. The climate forty days board. R. March he replied for Dr attention it was been, a exhaus

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him Health Officer in December 1837, and arranged that he should receive a grant of 10s. a day for inspecting ships. Reed certainly made the most of this opportunity.

Very soon complaints began to come in about the new Health Officer; he was said to be neglecting all his duties except the lucrative shipping one. Dr McLaren wrote bitterly that the sick poor were 'totally neglected by Mr Reed since he had become Health Officer—although he held the situation of Parish Surgeon he refused to visit many seriously ill—some had died for want of earlier attention'.

The passengers and crews of the ships using the port also objected to the Health Officer's excessive fees; his habit was 'to charge 10/6 for *advice* to seamen, 21/- to Captain and passengers, besides medicine, on any ships he boarded'. The climax came when he put a Dutch ship into quarantine forty days after any sickness or death had occurred on board. Reed lost his job over this (he was dismissed on 26 March 1838) but when he was asked why he had done it he replied, 'Oh! I did it to please Dr Barry'. It says much for Dr Barry's reputation for integrity that no serious attention seems to have been given to this remark, and that it was treated as palpably ridiculous, but it may well have been, as far as Barry was concerned, the last straw which exhausted her patience.

On 2 April 1838, General Middlemore wrote to Lord Glenelg: 'I have to regret that Dr James Barry has so conducted himself that I have ordered him home under arrest. The proceedings of a Court of Inquiry with various documents relative to Dr James Barry's conduct have been transmitted for the Commander-in-Chief's Information and guidance by the *London*, in which ship Dr Barry has embarked.'



Unfortunately the proceedings of the Court of Inquiry are not filed with the other documents in the Public Record Office, and it is impossible to discover what charge the doctor had to answer this time. A tale current in St Helena was that Dr Barry was expelled from the Garrison mess for having 'declined a challenge in no honourable way'. This seems strangely out of character, and more important matters must surely have been involved. There were plenty of them: the old quarrel with the Assistant Commissary-General; the new quarrel about the payments for civil services; the unpleasant aspersions of Mr Reed.

Dr Barry could have been no favourite with the men she had to reprimand. She knew that, but continued to do her duty as she saw it, and afterwards, when she had left St Helena, she wrote to Lord Glenelg: 'having to establish some system, everything being in a most confused and disgusting state, so far as Military and Civil Hospitals were concerned on my arrival, it required great exertion and much ungracious and painful duties fell to my lot from which, altho' I have personally suffered, yet I am proud to say the service has benefited considerably'.

There is no doubt that Dr Barry suffered heavily on that March day of 1838 when, under arrest, she had to pass through Jamestown on her way to H.M.S. *London*, the ship that was to take her home. Fortunately an eye-witness account of the scene was published in 1867 by Dickens in his magazine *All the Year Round*, an account which General Chamberlayne, who had known Barry well, said, in a letter to *The Lancet*, he believed to be 'pretty nearly correct':

On one of those still sultry mornings peculiar to the tropics, the measured step of the doctor's pony woke up the echoes of the valley. Then came the P.M.O. looking faded and crestfallen. He was in plain clothes. He had shrunk away

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wonderfully. His blue jacket hung loosely about him, his white trousers were a world too wide, the veil garnishing his broad straw hat covered his face, and he carried the inevitable umbrella over his head so that it saved him from the general gaze. The street was deserted, but other eyes besides the writer's looked on the group through the Venetian blinds. No sentry presented arms at the gates, and the familiar quartet proceeded unnoticed along the lines to the ship's boat in waiting.

It is a pity that there are no records available to show the reactions of the Commander-in-Chief, and of the Director-General of the Army Medical Department, to Dr Barry's return to London in May under arrest. During her two years' service at St Helena she had pushed through the reforms required by Sir James McGrigor, she had followed—only too closely—his manuals of instruction, and yet here she was sent home in disgrace! But Sir James McGrigor was a just man, and he must have considered that Barry had already suffered sufficient punishment. By midsummer she was installed at 8 Great Ryder Street, St James's, her freedom restored.

Soon after Barry's departure from St Helena the Treasury decided that the St Helena medical officers would not be asked to refund the overplus paid to them in error, but that the allowance made to them for civil duties would be discontinued as from 1 October 1836. Filled with wrath on hearing this decision, Dr Barry took up her pen on 16 August 1838, and wrote to Lord Glenelg, protesting. Even the Military Chaplain, she said, had received £250 per annum extra for civil duties, and she proceeded to enumerate the 'laborious and important duties' which had been imposed on her, with a staff of only two assistant-surgeons, 'in addition to the usual military duties of the superintendence of the garrison as P.M.O.':



(1) The Superintendence and charge of the Civil General Hospital and the patients therein—consisting of Paupers and other Indigent persons of the Civil population of St Helena—prisoners and convicts, Lascars and Invalids of the B.E.I. Co Service, Seamen of the Merchant Service—English, Dutch, French, American, etc, who from Scurvy, Accidents (requiring capital operations) or acute diseases could not proceed on their respective voyages.

(2) Paupers and Indigent Persons, whose disease did not require Hospital treatment, were prescribed for by me, daily, at the Dispensary, from the hours of 12-3 p.m.

(3) I also attended the Prison. I had likewise succeeded in establishing the vaccine virus on the Island—a matter of eminent importance to a Colony where vessels touch for water, from many parts of the world.

Dr Barry's claim went through the usual channels, after she had first been informed by the Colonial Office that her method of approach, as usual, had been unorthodox. She should, first of all, have placed her claim in the hands of the Governor of the Colony in which the service had been performed. Her letter had, therefore, been sent to General Middlemore for his investigation and report.

General Middlemore's investigation took the form of the appointment of a Board of Medical Officers to consider Dr Barry's claim. The idea was sound enough, but the choice of officers to serve on the Board was unfortunate. The Board was presided over by Mr Courtney, the Apothecary, who had been made P.M.O. by the Governor on Dr Barry's departure (an appointment which Lord Glenelg later refused to confirm), and the members of the Board were Barry's juniors, officers who had worked under her throughout, and who evidently cordially disliked her: Assistant-Surgeon Eddie, now Acting-Surgeon to the 91st Regiment, the man whom Dr Barry had commended in that first

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despatch, and his colleague, Dr McLaren, Assistant-Surgeon, 91st Regiment.

This very junior Medical Board suffered from no inhibition as to its ability to deal justly with the claims of Dr Barry, as put forward in the letter of 16 August 1838, and on 25 February 1839 its unanimous and very full Report was submitted:

That the various Civil Duties on which Dr James Barry founds his claim were *actually* and *efficiently* performed, but the inference left to be drawn that they were so wholly by himself is not in accordance with the real circumstances of the case, and the Board feels itself bound to express its opinion on the point by observing that whilst seeking to enhance his own Services on the one hand by an allusion to the small number (two) of Regimental Medical Officers it would have been more ingenuous and in accordance with fact, on the other, to have stated how efficiently those two Regimental Medical Officers performed not only their own duties but also many of his, both Civil and Staff which he was daily in the habit of imposing upon them, and to have noticed the important services of Asst. Staff Surgeon Hopkins in the Civil Hospital and of Mr Courtney, Apothecary to the Forces, in the Dispensary.

The Board now approaches an extremely delicate and painful part of its duty viz, a becoming notice of Dr James Barry's extraordinary conduct in endeavouring apparently to augment the assumed value of his own Service by something stronger than mere disparagement of those of others, as evinced in his allegation of the 'confused and disgusting state' in which he found the Hospitals.

The Board is willing to hope for the sake of Truth and Candour that Dr James Barry might possibly only have intended an allusion to the defective state of the accommodation and not a reflection on the Administration of the duties of the Hospital, and the Board feels happily released from all necessity for further comment by the impossibility of its being



believed that His Excellency Major-General Middlemore, or Lt. Colonel Anderson, Commanding the 91st Regiment could have tolerated a 'confused and disgusting' administration to have existed for a day.

J. Courtney. P.M.O. President

W. C. Eddie. Acting-Surg. 91st Regt.

George McLaren M.D. Acting-Surg. 91st Regt.

This Report, with no mention, it should be observed, of Dr Barry's hospital reforms, was sent to Lord Glenelg by General Middlemore with a covering letter in which he said, 'I do not consider Dr James Barry to have any claim beyond what he received for the performance of his ordinary duties in this command'.

That was enough for both the Colonial Office and the Treasury. On 4 June 1839 the news was conveyed to Dr Barry that her appeal had failed, and that the Governor of St Helena concurred in the view of the Medical Board that the services rendered by Dr Barry were not of a nature requiring any extra remuneration.

Once again the case of Dr Barry was closed, and she received not one penny of civil pay. The fact that on her return to England she suffered no punishment for her behaviour at St Helena has been ascribed by many of those who have written about her to that mysterious 'influence' which they believe to have been behind her. But in the light of the facts as revealed in the Public Record Office's files and quoted above, surely Dr Barry's own actions were creditable enough to have preserved her from ignominious punishment. She did not indeed escape as lightly as has been so often suggested. She was demoted; she had to wait for several years before she served again as a P.M.O., and when she was posted to the West Indies in November 1838 it was as a simple Staff Surgeon that she went.

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## IX

DR BARRY sailed for Barbados on 24 November 1838, but after landing there she must have gone straight on to Antigua where she was in the summer of 1839. The Windward and Leeward Command, to which she had been posted, was an extensive one consisting of Barbados, British Guiana, Trinidad, Tobago, Grenada, St Vincent's, St Lucia, Dominica, Antigua with Montserrat, and St Kitt's with Nevis and Tortola. Sir James McGrigor must have chosen the station advisedly, for there were here no political nor administrative problems to embroil his fiery little medical officer; nothing was required of the Staff Surgeon to the Forces but hard work, very hard work, and high professional skill, for the Windward and Leeward Command was no health resort.

The statistics, indeed, which confronted Dr Barry on arrival were rather depressing, for the mortality rate among the white troops in the Command was considered to be about six times as high as in the United Kingdom. As in Jamaica, fever was the most deadly of all diseases, remittent fever in the marshy settlements of Demerara and Berbice and, far worse, yellow fever in Tobago, St Lucia, Dominica and Guiana. There were other troubles too; inflammation of the lungs—twice as fatal as in Britain; chronic dysentery—one case in five usually proving fatal; and, a fact which was alarming the Horse Guards, delirium tremens among the troops was taking a large and ever-increasing toll. In 1842 (when the ratio per 1,000 of D.T. cases admitted to



hospital was 16.5 in the Windward and Leeward Command) Dr Barry had to answer a questionnaire on the subject sent out from London by the Director-General. Dr Barry was well qualified to give an opinion, as she had served in the very places where the trouble was at its worst—Mauritius, for instance, had even more cases than the Windward and Leeward Command, and excused so unfortunate a state of affairs by saying that 'the extremely low price of spirits renders it almost impracticable to repress this vice among the troops by any coercive measures, however severe'. When Circular No. 12378 (Report on D.T.) reached her, Dr Barry answered its four questions in her usual decisive manner and in her usual forthright prose:

(1) [Cause]

There can be no question but that the primary cause is the continued use and abuse of ardent spirits, and the proximate cause the general derangement of the nervous system and of organs of digestion.

(2) [Paroxysms]

The legitimate Delirium Tremens occasionally commences with ferocious delirium, but invariably when the paroxysm subsides it assumes the trembling nervous Delirium from which it derives its name, in many cases every species of Blue Devils torment the sufferer inducing him if not watched often to commit suicide:—All stimuli cease to have effect, the stomach rejects everything and low mutterings are succeeded by stertorous breathing which precedes death, the final termination of this unfortunate Disease.

(3) [Distinguishing symptoms between D.T. & other delirium]

To have seen a single case should be sufficient to prevent any mistake. Vide the Learned & Elaborate Works of these eminent authors, the distinction is too evident to require any further Lesson.



(4) [Treatment]

This must vary according to the state of the patient. Stimuli such as Brandy, Champaign, Opium, Capsicum, etc. Keeping the Bowels open, light nourishing diet, occasionally are efficacious in the first and second attack. But as it is almost impossible to cure the habit of Drunkenness, particularly in the West Indies where, to use a patient's own words: 'The weather is always too hot, rum always too cheap, and a man always too dry,' perhaps the only chance would be to embark the subject in a temperance vessel for a cold climate, with plenty of nutritious diet.

In conclusion, the strength of the White Troops at Trinidad were 278—6 cases of D.T. were admitted, one remained:—2 terminated fatally, 4 discharged, 1 still remains.

James Barry, M.D. P.M.O.

Surgeon to the Forces.

Dr Barry, after four years in the Command, was now P.M.O. of Trinidad, where she had settled 'at a country-house, a gun-shot from St James's Barracks, about two miles from Port-of-Spain'. This became her home, although she had, from the nature of the Command, to do a good deal of travelling between the islands. Colonel Rogers gives a graphic description of Dr Barry when on one occasion, carrying the little dog, she prepared to embark on a naval gunboat which was to take her to Berbice for an inspection of hospitals. She expected to have a cabin to herself, and made sure, before sailing, that the goat, which was to supply her with milk during the voyage, was safely on board.

Dr Barry was still a vegetarian, and, in modern parlance a dietitian, but at this station she found the diet of the troops good. They had two meals a day. Breakfast (1 pint cocoa and ration bread) and dinner (fresh meat made into broth, with vegetables, or salt meat boiled into soup, with peas, eaten with yams and potatoes) and sometimes supper,



although this was not common. A man's weekly rations, for which he paid 5d., consisted of '7 lbs. of bread, 2 lbs. of fresh meat, 2 lbs. of salt beef, 27 oz. salt pork, 9 oz. sugar, 10 oz. rice, 5 oz. cocoa and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  pints of peas'.

The men had few complaints, and the Command was really a happy one. Dr Barry had time to concentrate solely on medicine, and we catch more glimpses of Barry, the keen and kindly doctor, here than anywhere else. Her professional pre-eminence was never questioned:

His presence at the hospital was a signal for the juniors to be on the alert. The soldiers liked him and trusted in his skill; but woe betide the laggard medico who was not there to receive the P.M.O. or who had swerved one hair's breadth from his instructions!

Barry's devotion to the men under her care, her constant attention to their welfare, and her kindness to their wives and children is made abundantly clear. In Colonel Rogers' novel, *A Modern Sphinx*, admittedly fiction, there is one description of 'Dr Fitzjames' which stands out with such vivid realism from the romantic background of the book that it must surely bear the mark of truth:

He may sometimes draw the long bow but he is a gentleman every inch of him, and can do a kind action as a set-off to his bombast. His attention, for instance, to the men's wives and children is worthy of all praise. Blear-eyed creatures many of them are, and I have heard him lecture them on weak vision in a most practical way. After soaking a bit of rag in a decoction of tea (he always, I believe, carried a pinch of tea about with him for the purpose) this is how he pointed his moral one day when I happened to be visiting the married quarters:

'You must lie down, my dear,' he said to a tender-eyed sergeant's wife, 'just like this' (and he lay down flat on the



ground), 'and you must place a bit of tea-soaked rag over each eye, thus' (and he did it), 'and you must remain quiet in this position for half-an-hour every night for a fortnight.'

In Trinidad, too, Dr Barry's relations with her colleagues were, for once, amicable. In the interval between the retirement of Dr Draper, Inspector-General of Hospitals in the Windward and Leeward Command, and the arrival of his successor, Dr Bone, Dr Barry took over the duties of Acting-Inspector-General and was thanked in General Orders for the manner in which she had 'conducted the Department'. At Port of Spain Dr Barry was 'highly respected, and a frequent attendant at the Governor's levées . . . with a regulation sword as long as himself'. It would seem as though she had at last achieved her ambition, and yet it was in Trinidad that disaster very nearly overtook her.

In the years that she spent in the West Indies, from 1838 to 1845, Dr Barry was ageing rapidly. She looked between fifty and sixty, but she took great offence when she read an official report, written about this time in Trinidad, in which it was stated that she was 'probably fifty years of age', and she took the author to task for such 'a base attempt' to blast her prospects!

What Dr Barry did not know was that a serving officer (who signed himself 'Captain' in *The Lancet* correspondence about Barry in 1895) had, when in Trinidad in 1844, not only suspected her to be about sixty, but also to be other than she seemed. He wrote to the editor of *The Lancet*:

It was in the year 1844 that I was sent from Barbados to Trinidad to sit on a general court-martial which was exciting great interest in the islands at that time. On the assembling of the court an individual appeared as spectator who at once attracted my attention. He was in the full



dress of an army surgeon, but had all the appearance of being a woman. On making enquiries I was told that the individual was Dr Barry, the principal medical officer of the district. The impression and general belief was that he was a hermaphrodite and as such escaped much comment or observation in places where everyone was used to him. . . . But I was convinced James Barry was a woman about 60 years of age, and being much interested in him I cultivated his acquaintance and we became very friendly. He frequently asked me to visit him and I attempted to draw out his antecedents but found him very reticent.

There can be no doubt that in the early Victorian era, as warriors grew more hirsute, Dr Barry's smooth face must have become more conspicuous. The boyish voice, too, had now become shrill, and the sandy curls were dyed to a reddish hue. Others, besides 'Captain', had doubts about Dr Barry.

Dr McCowan, who had also served in Trinidad, wrote the first letter to the press ever published about Barry, a fortnight after the announcement of her death had appeared in the *Whitehaven News*. To the editor of that paper Dr McCowan wrote on 7 September 1865:

I would take it kind if you could give me some information of this extraordinary person. . . . He was always suspected of being a female from his effeminate features and voice, and having neither beard nor whiskers. He was a very bold person, and challenged one or two of our officials for naming him a diminutive creature. He had a favourite little dog which he always carried about with him, and it was currently said that he had made a will leaving the dog all his effects, and 'Sambo' £100 as a legacy. . . . He always took care never to be seen . . . like any ordinary man.

Dr C. F. Moore later joined in *The Lancet* correspondence

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to say that he had on one occasion been the medical officer of a ship on which Dr Barry travelled.

In common with all on board I was much struck with the peculiarities of this officer. . . . The diet and fondness for pets, the peculiar figure and appearance, all justified the ideas that were entertained about her at the time.

As long as good health lasted, Dr Barry was capable of coping with any situation that might arise, and, during thirty-two years' foreign service, she had never yet reported sick. Now in Trinidad she fell a victim to the dreaded yellow fever, and, what she had so far avoided doing, she had to do: she had to summon a medical attendant. She must have thought that she was dying, for this doctor, Dr O'Connor, said that Dr Barry had asked him 'not to allow his body to be inspected or disturbed in the event of his decease, but to be buried immediately with his clothes on'.

Dr Barry did, of course, recover from this illness, but unfortunately her assistant-surgeon had also had the idea that she was dying and decided that it was his duty to call, although this was strictly against orders. This young man took a companion with him who kept silence for over thirty years, and then only told this story to Colonel Rogers after the publication of his book about Barry, *A Modern Sphinx*, in 1881:

I was quartered as a subaltern in Trinidad while Dr Barry was serving there in the capacity of principal medical officer. One day a friend of mine, the assistant-surgeon, asked me to walk with him into Port of Spain. 'The P.M.O.,' said he, 'is down with fever at the house of a lady-friend, but has given strict injunctions to us not to visit him. Nevertheless I feel bound to call and see how he is, will you come with me?' On arrival my friend entered Barry's bed-room, while I remained on the verandah. In a few minutes he called me excitedly into



the room, exclaiming as he flung back the bed-clothes, 'See, Barry is a woman!'

At that moment the P.M.O. awoke to consciousness and gazed at us bewilderingly. But she quickly recovered presence of mind, and asked us in low tones to swear solemnly not to disclose her secret as long as she lived.

Nor did they, and so, a dangerous corner safely turned, Staff-Surgeon Dr James Barry was given sick leave without question, and left Trinidad for England on 14 October 1845.

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It took Dr Barry almost a year to recover from the yellow fever from which she had so nearly died in Trinidad; the War Office records show that she was 'At Home—sick' from 27 December 1845 until 2 November 1846, on which date she was posted to Malta as Principal Medical Officer. This was the beginning of more than a decade of service on the Mediterranean Station, four-and-a-half years at Malta, then a year at Corfu, a year's leave at home, and then back to Corfu for four years until she finally left the island on 23 June 1857.

In some ways conditions in Malta were pleasant, but Malta was not a particularly healthy station. During the course of Staff-Surgeon Barry's service there, the troops suffered from a serious epidemic of cholera, and for her treatment of the sick during this outbreak she could boast that she received the thanks of the Duke of Wellington. Soon afterwards, on 16 April 1851, she had the satisfaction of receiving promotion to the rank of Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals, and was posted to Corfu.

Dr Barry appears to have made little change in her mode of life during the years that had passed since the early Cape Colony days; she still had the black servant and the dog, although it was said that it now had a cat and a parrot as its companions in the doctor's household. In Corfu, and later in the Crimea, she also had as a personal servant Thomas Salter, of the 48th Foot (Northamptonshire Regiment), whose grandson, Mr F. E. Salter, can recall some



of his reminiscences about his master, whom he never suspected of being a woman, even though he had noticed the doctor's exceptionally small white hands and unusually high collar. To Salter Dr Barry appeared as a kindly martinet: the little doctor would do all she could do to relieve the sufferings of the men in her charge, but when she had them up for medical inspection she would pass along the ranks muttering 'Dirty beasts! Dirty beasts! Go and clean yourselves.' A sound prescription, of course, if somewhat bluntly expressed. According to Salter, Dr Barry was always very smartly turned out, very spick and span in a well-tailored uniform. The Royal Army Medical College at Millbank has in its possession a sketch of her made at Corfu about this time which shows her in full uniform, cocked hat and epaulettes, carrying a fly switch, and followed by the small dog. Dr Barry was always well mounted. Sir William MacKinnon, who had served in Corfu, remembered that she had there 'a lovely grey Arab', which she later gave to 'one of the Somersets'.

Although Lord Charles Somerset had died in 1831, soon after his departure from the Cape, Dr Barry had always kept up her friendship with his family. In a letter to *The Lancet* in 1895, a correspondent, 'A.M.S.' stated that he had last seen Barry in London in 1851 or 1852 (i.e. when she was on leave between her two spells of duty at Corfu). Dr Barry, said 'A.M.S.', was then living in Down Street, 'and was a great friend of Lady Charles Somerset who used to live near by in Piccadilly at that time'. Barry had also remained on good terms with Lord Charles's youngest brother, Lord Fitzroy Somerset, who in 1852 became Lord Raglan, and, later, Commander-in-Chief in the Crimea.

Dr Barry was, of course, serving in Corfu at the outbreak





*Dr. Barry. (?)  
Insp. Gen. of Hosp.  
vide Army List.  
1852  
Corfu*

Dr. James Barry, Inspector-General of  
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*A sketch made in Corfu, 1852. Artist unknown.*





Dr. James Barry, aged about 70, shortly before her death.

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of the Crimean War in March 1854. She at once volunteered for service in the Crimea, but was told that there was at that time no vacancy there for an officer of the rank of Deputy Inspector-General, so she had to content herself with doing what she could in Corfu, making herself, in her own words, 'as useful as possible to the Army before Sebastopol'. After the terrible winter of 1854 she had her hands full. She had suggested to Lord Raglan and to Inspector-General Sir J. Hall that she would look after the sick and wounded from the Crimea if they were sent to Corfu, and they responded by sending her 500 men, of whom '400 returned fit for active service, having been restored to health in an unusually short period'. This, however, had not been accomplished without conflict, quite in the Barry tradition.

On 17 February 1855 the transport *Dunbar* brought 462 sick and wounded men from Scutari to Corfu. By the end of a fortnight 53 of these were fit for duty again, and 63 for 'slight duty', 69 were confined entirely to bed, and 260, although not confined entirely to bed, were under daily hospital treatment; the rest had died. The arrival of the men raised many problems for Major-General Macintosh, G.O.C. Ionian Islands. The first thing he had to do was to assemble a Board of Officers to sanction the destruction of the soldiers' clothing, 'as it was nearly worn out, and infested to such a degree with vermin that it could not have been purified except by a process which would have rendered it altogether useless'. This meant that as soon as the men were convalescent and out of their hospital clothes they would have to be supplied with new uniform; but at whose expense? The majority of the men had brought with them neither their 'small account books, nor any No 1 Reports', so that it was impossible to ascertain their correct



rate of pay. In due course these queries were answered by Headquarters: complete clothing would be sent from Scutari, and meanwhile fatigue dress of blue cloth trousers and loose coats could be made at Corfu, for which the men should pay; as the men became fit they should be sent to Scutari by the Austrian steamboat.

Unfortunately General Macintosh thought that he had a better idea than that, and on 1 April, having inspected 213 men whom Dr Barry had passed fit to return to duty, and having 'considered their appearance very favourable', he decided to send them back not on the Austrian steamboat, but on board H.M.S. *Sidon* and H.M.S. *Leopard*, when these ships conveyed the last two Regiments of the Line to Turkey. They proved to be so crowded that only ninety-three of the convalescents embarked, leaving Macintosh with 120 men on the island, passed fighting fit but with 'no arms or accoutrements for the performance of their usual duties'. In consequence he employed them on the 'ordinary Fatigues of the Garrison'. As this was quite likely to undo all the good that Dr Barry's treatment had done, it is understandable that she gave 'considerable opposition' to the scheme. At the same time she should not have allowed her fiery temper to get out of control to the extent it did. A stormy argument ensued with Lord Methuen (O.C. Royal Wiltshire Militia, to which regiment the recovered men were attached), in the course of which the little doctor threatened to report the whole matter direct to Lord Raglan; and, according to General Macintosh, who felt impelled on 7 May to send a report of the affair to Lord Raglan, added:

apparently with a view to impress Lord Methuen with a belief that he possessed more than usual influence with your Lordship, that he was a private friend of yours, and 'had resided 13 years in the house of your Lordship's brother'. This



avowal, coupled with his injudicious interference with the management of these men, after he had pronounced them to be fairly recovered, and, therefore, properly speaking, beyond his immediate control, unless again sent to Hospital in the usual manner, causes me to apprehend his having endeavoured to give erroneous impressions as to the treatment they have received, but, in case that Dr Barry should have done what he said it was his intention to do, I need not say that I feel quite convinced that your Lordship's mind will in no manner be biassed by any statement where a General Officer's measures may have been discussed or the proceedings of officers of rank under his orders reported to superior authority by any one under his command without his having even been made aware of it at the time.

It is clear from this letter that General Macintosh believed Dr Barry to be a bombastic snob, if not a liar, in thus claiming friendship with the Beaufort family, whereas the sober fact was that Dr Barry was speaking nothing but the truth. But by 1855 Lord Charles Somerset had been dead for nearly 25 years; a generation had grown up which had never heard of him, nor of Dr Barry's close association with him, the troublous days at the Cape at the beginning of the century were all forgotten.

In any case Dr Barry should have remembered that at St Helena a direct appeal to authority at the highest level had resulted in a court-martial, and she should have refrained from threatening direct communication with the Commander-in-Chief. Fortunately Lord Raglan's usual tact saved the situation. In the midst of all the other worries which beset him before Sebastopol he found time on 21 May to scribble an answer to General Macintosh, which could offend neither party:

I am sorry to learn that Dr Barry, of whose zeal for the service I entertain no doubt, should have thought fit to



interfere in a matter . . . which rested with you alone. You will be glad to learn that he has not written to me, and I should hope that he may upon reflection feel that such a course would not only be highly improper, but would be utterly disapproved by me.

In spite of this incident there is no doubt that Dr Barry's experiment of nursing the wounded in Corfu had been a success, and it seems a pity that it was not repeated on any scale, for the recovery rate must have been about the highest in the whole of the unfortunate Crimean campaign.

Meanwhile the health of the men on the outward trip to the Crimea had also to be considered. The 97th Regiment had been ordered from Malta to the Piraeus, where it arrived unprovided with medical comforts and medicines, and with ninety-two men suffering from cholera. The Officer-Commanding the Regiment, Colonel Lockyer, sent an urgent message to Dr Barry informing him of the situation, and, 'in two hours after the receipt of Colonel Lockyer's letter, Dr Barry had embarked a supply of comforts and medicines for the use of the Regiment and Hospital and continued to forward further supplies once a week, there being no other possible means by which such supplies could have been procured'.

Barry says:

For my conduct upon that occasion I was thanked by the Director-General, and by the Officers Commanding 97th, 3rd (Buffs) and 91st Regiments who consecutively received similar aid.

Dr Barry also received the thanks of the navy for the diagnosis of a malignant fever which had broken out on board the *Modeste*, and for 'successful treatment of the sick, and the purification of the ship'.

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All this was good and useful work, but Dr Barry was still determined to see the Crimea at closer quarters. As she had been refused permission to go in an official capacity, she decided to spend her leave there. Possibly she was a guest of her friend Lord Raglan at Headquarters—Surgeon-Major Longmore told Colonel Rogers that he had seen Dr Barry with Lord Raglan in the Crimea—but at any rate she remained for about three months with the 4th Division before Sebastopol, making herself as useful, she tells us, ‘as opportunities offered, which can be testified by Sir John Hall and the Colonel and officers of the 48th Regiment’.

The exact date of Dr Barry’s visit to the Crimea is unknown; the 48th Regiment landed in April 1855, and formed part of the 2nd Brigade of the 4th Division. Whether she was there on 28 June 1855, and with Lord Raglan at the time of his death, as she had been with his brother, Lord Charles Somerset, is not recorded.

In June 1857, Dr Barry’s work in Corfu ended, and she spent from July to October of that year at home on leave. Sir James McGrigor was no longer at the Horse Guards; after thirty-six years as Director-General of the Army Medical Department he had retired on 6 February 1851, and had been succeeded by Sir Andrew Smith. Sir Andrew was, perhaps, not as careful in fitting his medical officers into the colonial stations most suited to them as Sir James had been, or perhaps his freedom of choice was limited by the situation in which he found himself in that year of 1857. It was the year of Florence Nightingale’s greatest triumphs, the year in which, forcing down all opposition, she had fulfilled her ambition to see set up a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army, and, as she herself said, ‘every one of the members of the Commission was carried by force of will against Dr Andrew Smith’. Miss Nightingale was all



powerful in 1857, and when she said that she wished Dr Thomas Alexander, who had seen active service in the Crimea, recalled from his post in Canada to act on the Commission, Dr Thomas Alexander had to be recalled, without regard to the organization of the Canada Command.

Whatever the cause, Dr Barry's next, and last, posting seems the most inexplicable in her career. In 1857, she must have been well over sixty and all her forty-four years in the army had been spent in warm climates: the Cape, the West Indies, the Mediterranean. Now, in old age, she found herself attached (with local rank of Inspector-General of Hospitals) to the Canada Command. As this included Upper and Lower Canada, with barracks and hospitals at Montreal, Quebec, Kingston and Toronto, it was part of Dr Barry's duty to winter in Montreal, and the thermometer there fell to  $-18^{\circ}$  F. in February 1858. She made the best of it; wrapped in 'musk ox robes', she travelled round the city in a magnificent red sleigh, complete with silver bells, coachman and footman.

Neither cold nor age affected Dr Barry's mental power. She had arrived in Canada on 3 November 1857, and very soon she had made her inspections and was, as usual, demanding reforms. After a few months a stream of letters from the Inspector-General's office began to descend on the Deputy Quarter-Master-General in Montreal. The first question raised was, characteristically, the provision of a suitable diet for the troops. Dr Barry's investigations had led her to the conclusion that the soldier's rations (1 lb. of bread and 1 lb. of meat daily) were ample but required variation, 'nothing', she said, 'contributes more to general health than change of diet', so she took up her pen on 7 April 1858, and wrote to the Deputy Q.M.G. as follows:

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Sir,  
I have the honour to submit for the favourable consideration of the Lieutenant-General Commanding the necessity of varying the Diet of the Troops in this Command.

Having observed that fresh beef only is daily issued, whereas on other foreign stations, viz, West Indies, Mediterranean, Cape of Good Hope, nay even St Helena, salt pork is substituted once a week, and the contractor is bound to supply one day in each week fresh mutton in lieu of beef, which I should most earnestly beg to recommend as a measure that would contribute much, not only to the health but comfort of the soldiers.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your most obedient humble servant,

James Barry, M.D.

In an annual report sent to London in April 1858, Dr Barry went further and suggested that ovens should be constructed generally in the cookhouses (there were none at all in the Jesuit Barracks at Quebec). This innovation, she said, would afford 'the cheering change of a roast instead of eternal boiled beef and soup'.

In this report Dr Barry also stated her views on the water and drainage systems; she evidently did not think much of the Quebec barracks:

The water is not of easy access for cooking, drinking and ablution, etc, being raised from wells by manual labour during the summer, and in winter brought by water carts, from some of the water companies' stations by contract, although at the same expense water pipes might be introduced into the Barracks.

The Drainage and Sewerage of these Barracks (Jesuits) as well as that of the Citadel requires attention and repair, and indeed generally through the Command the Drainage and Sewerage might be improved which would be beneficial in a sanitary point of view.



Having dealt with diet, water and drainage, Dr Barry then turned her attention to the sleeping quarters of the troops, which she found generally throughout the Command 'too much crowded'. She recommended 'a diminution of at least 3 beds in each room', which 'would contribute much to the health and comfort of the occupant', and she further advised that hair mattresses should be substituted for the straw paillasses then in use. On 4 August 1858 she wrote urgently to the Deputy Q.M.G.:

Sir,

I have the honour to submit to the Colonel Commanding that Hair Mattresses and Hair or feather pillows be substituted for the paillasses and straw pillows now issued to the various Hospitals in this Command. As it must be evident the great comfort it would be to a poor sufferer to rest his emaciated and feverish limbs on something more genial than hard straw.

Should there not be sufficient material in the Command, I beg most strongly to recommend that it may be applied for from home by the earliest opportunity.

I have the honor, etc

James Barry, M.D.

Perhaps the most surprising of Dr Barry's findings was the lack of all provision, in these Canadian barracks, of married quarters. In 1858, just a hundred years ago, the soldier and his young bride were expected to share the common dormitory with a score or so of men. Dr Barry was horrified, as well she might be, at such a state of things, and blamed it, in part, for the prevalent drunkenness. She wrote:

Probably one of the causes [of drunkenness], and a great one, is the absence of separate accommodation for married persons, as, however limited, still a room for each family



would indeed be not only a great boon to the soldier but diminish intemperance, which is the chief cause of crime, punishment, sickness and death. This I have annually iterated and re-iterated.

For example, a woman humbly born, but modestly and religiously educated, becomes the wife of a soldier, is suddenly placed in a Barrack room with 10 or 20 men, perhaps some married, she becomes frightened and disgusted, next becomes habituated, or in despair has recourse to drunkenness, and not infrequently the husband, a good man, joins with his wife and he becomes the occupant of a cell in a military prison, which, had a similar room been told off for each married person, they might live with decency and bring up their children in the fear of God, without being tainted with the awful and disgusting language of a barrack room.

Dr Barry, living a very secluded life, spent two winters in Canada, and suffered badly from bronchitis. She was treated for this by Dr G. W. Campbell, who was afterwards Dean of McGill University, among whose medical students at McGill was young William Osler (later Sir William Osler, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University) who would tell the story of Dr Campbell's cautionary tale to his class: 'Gentlemen,' Campbell would say, 'if I had not stood in some awe of Inspector-General Barry's rank and medical attainments I would have examined him—that is her—far more thoroughly. Because I did not, and because his—confound it, her—bed-room was always in almost total darkness when I paid my calls, this, ah, crucial point, escaped me. Which shows you should never let yourself be too impressed by any colleague to treat him just like any other patient.'

In the spring of 1859, Dr Barry had a severe attack of influenza, which was then sweeping Canada, and was



ordered home to England for examination by a Medical Board. She left Quebec on 14 May 1859, and landed at Liverpool on the 26, after what she termed a 'rough and tempestuous voyage', during which she suffered much from sea-sickness. In fact such were its effects that she had to spend some days in Liverpool to recuperate, and did not reach London until 1 June. Three days later she went before the Medical Board (consisting of three junior medical officers, a fact she bitterly resented) who pronounced her unfit for further service, with the result that on 19 July 1859 she was placed on half pay, her active military career ended.

This was by no means what Dr Barry had envisaged. Although she had now reached the top of her profession, having been made Inspector-General of Hospitals on 7 December 1858, and had forty-six years of army service behind her, she had no wish to retire. There was, until 1873, no stated age for the retirement of army surgeons, and by 1859 Dr Barry must have been sixty-five at the very least; but, if she could have served another twenty months in the rank of Inspector-General, it would have made a great difference to her financially, or so she said. Once more Dr Barry wrote a Memorial to the Secretary of State for War, 'praying to be restored to full pay, and ordered back to Canada until he has completed his full period of service, of which he requires nearly 20 months; by which means your Memorialist will be saved from great pecuniary loss'.

In a rough draft of this same 'Memorial' Dr Barry commented at some length upon the Medical Board which had examined her:

Without impugning the desire of the young officers who examined your Memorialist to perform their duty impartially and honestly he has to observe that not one of them had ever



seen your Memorialist before; that your Memorialist owing to his late illness in Canada, and to the effects of a sea voyage, from which he suffers greatly, looked unusually delicate and meagre, and that consequently the Board not unnaturally somewhat hastily jumped to the conclusion that your Memorialist was in a bad state of health; whereas the fact is that he feels and believes himself to be stronger and in better health than he has been for the last two or three years, and fully capable of effectively performing the duties of his rank.

In the final form in which the Memorial was submitted to the Secretary of State this paragraph was considerably curtailed, but is, perhaps, even more self-revealing, as Barry refers to 'three *Junior* officers, perfect strangers to me and to my peculiar habits'.

There is little doubt that the three junior officers must have been somewhat surprised when confronted for the first time with Inspector-General Dr James Barry, but their opinion was accepted. How right their verdict was we cannot tell, for Dr Barry lived to draw half pay for another six years, and to see her name figure in Hart's Army List as the senior of Her Majesty's Inspectors-General of Hospitals, rank equivalent to the army rank of Major-General.

But Dr Barry was embittered and dissatisfied, and evidently felt that she had been badly treated by those in authority. Not only did the financial side worry her—and in her Memorial for her restoration to full pay she pointed out 'what immense personal outlay' each change of station had cost—but the rumour that she hoped for a knighthood is evidently true, in the light of the last sentence of that Memorial: 'I am loath to close a career which impartially may be deemed to have been a useful and faithful one, without some special mark of Her Majesty's gracious favour.'



This was surely another example of Dr Barry's political obtuseness, because by now Florence Nightingale, firmly convinced that she was the first person ever to have considered the diet and living conditions of the troops, had the ear of both Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort. Nothing therefore was less likely than that a mark of royal favour would be bestowed on any of the 'old gang' of the Army Medical Department, of whom Dr Barry was indubitably one.

As no honour was accorded, Inspector-General Dr James Barry, in 1859, fell into the obscurity of retirement.



## XI

It is difficult to discover exactly how Dr Barry spent her retirement, and what records there are are somewhat contradictory. It would appear that she made her headquarters in London, paying occasional country-house visits and wintering abroad. A *Notes and Queries* correspondent, 'R.A.', had met the doctor at one of these parties about that time, and wrote:

As a girl my mother and I were staying with some old friends in the country and our hostess begged us to regard leniently the waspish caustic temper of Dr Barry, her only other visitor. She evidently had some misgiving as to the view the doctor might take of his fellow guests, and, after many years, I recall with pleasure that both my mother and I, to the relief of our kind hostess, made a not unfavourable impression on the crotchety gentleman. How well I remember him!—a small irritable man, I can still see his tiny hands. He had a pale, almost ashen countenance, with acquiline features, pinched and wizened, and crowned with an unmistakeable flaxen wig. . . . He spoke in a squeaky, querulous voice both well and wittily, and his constant companion was a small white dog, almost as cross as its master. He had a black servant, arrayed in European dress.

Colonel Rogers, in a letter to *The Lancet* in 1895, described his first meeting with Dr Barry as being in the West Indies in 1857, but his memory must have led him astray by a year or two, as in that year Barry was in Canada and could not well have made the journey until she had



retired. Colonel Rogers (then a Captain in the 3rd West India Regiment) wrote:

I travelled with this remarkable character on board the inter-colonial steamer plying between St Thomas and Barbados, when I occupied the same cabin, I in the top, she in the lower berth—of course without any suspicion of her sex on my part. I well remember how, in a harsh and peevish voice, she ordered me out of the cabin—blow high, blow low—while she dressed in the morning. 'Now then, youngster, clear out of my cabin while I dress,' she would say. The doctor was going at the time to visit her old friend and enemy General Sir Josias Cleote (commanding troops) with whom, when A.D.C. to the Governor of the Cape, she had fought a duel.

That Dr Barry did return to the West Indies during these years is made clear in a letter to the *Glasgow Herald* (December 1949) written by the late Mr John McCrindle whose parents had emigrated to Jamaica in 1859. Mr McCrindle, senior, had been appointed manager of Michell's Old Drug Store in Kingston with a house above the store, and Dr Barry was on the best of terms with him.

Dr Barry was well known to my parents when they lived in Kingston, Jamaica. They never at any time suspected his sex. My father was a chemist and druggist in Kingston, and the doctor dealt with him and frequently visited and often had my parents up to dine with him at the Camp. He had a well-set table for them, but he ate only vegetables and fruit. When he wanted a hair-cut he drove to their house, sent for a barber and got his hair cut in the drawing-room—of course all the floors were polished, so it was not difficult tidying up after he left.

Once when he had a severe illness he sent for my father and showed him a small black box, telling him that if he died my father was to get the box and keep it until it was sent for. He



often made them presents of jewellery. One piece he gave my father was a signet ring with a crest on it; to my mother he gave a memoriam ring with 'Sacred to the memory of Marion' engraved inside it.

On 21 July 1860 a daughter was born to the McCrindles and Dr Barry took a great fancy to the baby, giving her many presents, including a silver drinking mug and silver knife, fork and spoon; apparently Dr Barry even wanted to adopt the child, 'and said he would send her to his cousin in Scotland, I think a Lady Jane Gray or Grant'.

This statement, in conjunction with the crest on the ring, should surely have provided some clue to Dr James Barry's ancestry, but, unfortunately, neither did. Perhaps age was at last beginning to tell on Dr Barry and she was romancing a little, for she also told Mr McCrindle about a duel in which she had killed her opponent.

Certainly by 1860 Dr Barry was a frail little figure. Colonel N. J. C. Rutherford, a frequent contributor to the *Journal of the R.A.M.C.* on the subject of Barry, was able to obtain from Miss B. Mosse, grand-daughter of Surgeon-General C. B. Mosse, a photograph of Barry taken in Jamaica at this time and given to her grandfather. It shows the doctor in civilian clothes, frock coat and white stand-up collar, with a little white dog. Colonel Rutherford supplied the additional information that the ring shown in the photograph securing the 'flowing cravat' had been presented to Barry by the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian of Mexico. It had been given to Dr Barry by Maximilian in the course of one of his cruises in the Adriatic, in acknowledgement of the doctor's services to one of his crew at Corfu.

But however frail Dr Barry may have looked in 1860, she was able to get about and to survive five more winters. In October 1864, she stayed at Whitehaven Castle, which she



had frequently visited before, as the guest of the Earl of Lonsdale. While she was there Dr Barry took 'morning drives in company with Miss Lowther of Distington' and, with her black servant, became well known in the town. The *Whitehaven News*, one of the two English newspapers to print an obituary notice of Barry disclosing her sex, stated that:

Many of our town readers will have a distinct recollection of the person referred to. It will be remembered that upon her last visit she was attended by a black servant, of singular acuteness. The complexion of Sambo contrasted in a remarkable degree with the pale, sallow look of his mistress, and still more remarkable was the contrast between the lady and her servant in point of stature as well as in other minor respects. Their appearance in public naturally excited considerable attention. The attenuated form of the lady was generally understood to be due to a vegetarian diet, and many were the jokes that were passed at 'the Doctor's' expense during her ladyship's sojourn at the Castle.

Whether Dr Barry went abroad again in that winter of 1864 it is impossible to discover, but by the summer of 1865 she was established in London, unfortunately in Marylebone, at 14 Margaret Street. Unfortunately, because during that summer the combination of unusual heat and bad drainage produced in London an epidemic of diarrhoea from which 301 persons died during the first week of July, and the district which suffered most severely was Marylebone. By the end of the month the epidemic had abated slightly, but the Registrar-General's weekly returns on 29 July showed that it had caused 261 deaths in that week, and sixteen of the victims had died in Marylebone. One of them was Dr James Barry.

On the 26 July 1865, Mr Henry Durham, Registrar of

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the Marylebone district, issued a death certificate stating that on the previous day, 25 July, at 14 Margaret Street, James Barry, Inspector-General of Military Hospitals, 'a male person of about 70 years of age' had died of diarrhoea, and to this statement was put the mark of Sophia Bishop, of 14 Margaret Street, who had been present at the death.

But very soon an entirely different story must, discreetly, have been going the rounds of London, and quickly the press got hold of it. The story appeared first, on 14 August 1865, in an Irish newspaper, *Saunders's News Letter*; then (with 'acknowledgments to an Irish paper') in the *Manchester Guardian* of 21 August; and (with acknowledgments to the *Manchester Guardian*) in the *Whitehaven News* of 24 August. What is extraordinary is that the metropolitan newspapers allowed the provincials to enjoy this 'scoop', and never published the story themselves. Despite the statement in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, an obituary notice of Dr James Barry was never published in *The Times*, nor in any other London paper.

The *Manchester Guardian's* version of the story, printed at the beginning of this book, was a shortened form of the Irish newspaper's report. Indeed the English paper cut a most interesting paragraph out of the *Saunders's News Letter's* original text:

Very probably this discovery [that Barry was a woman] was elicited during the natural preparations for interment, but there seems to be an idea prevalent that either verbally, during the last illness, or by some writing perused immediately after his (for I must still use the 'masculine') death, he had begged to be buried without any post mortem examination of any sort. This, most likely, only aroused the curiosity of the two nurses who attended him, for it was to them, it appears, that the disclosure of this mystery is owing.



Under the circumstances, the fact was deemed so important that medical testimony was called in to report upon and record its truth. By this investigation not only was the assertion placed beyond a doubt, but it was equally beyond a doubt brought to light that the individual in question had, at some time or another, been a mother.

In spite of *Saunders's News Letter's* reporter being wrong in some particulars—notably in stating that Barry died in Corfu—he seems otherwise to have been well informed. Two years later, in the article in Dickens's *All the Year Round*, the reference to the 'two nurses' who disclosed the mystery was expanded: a charwoman, it seemed, had been called in to prepare the body for burial—Dr Barry's wishes in this respect having been disregarded—but hardly had she begun her task than she rushed downstairs: 'What do you mean', she said, 'by calling me to lay out a General, and the corpse is a woman's, and one who has borne a child?'

All this time the Horse Guards remained silent. What, from its sheer ineptitude, can only have been an unofficial apologia, appeared in the *Medical Times & Gazette* in September 1865, in the shape of a letter from Edward Bradford, Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals, in which he stated that 'the stories which have been circulated about him (an individual recently deceased) since his death are too absurd to be gravely refuted'. No official denial of the story and no official comments on it were published by the Army Medical Department.

What was generally believed was that the Horse Guards had immediately sent three army surgeons to Margaret Street to make a post-mortem report, and that they confirmed that Dr Barry was a woman. The 'Barry Papers' show that this idea was mistaken. What actually occurred was that Staff-Surgeon Major D. R. McKinnon, who had



been attending Dr Barry for bronchitis—and had known her in the West Indies—was called in during the last fatal attack of diarrhoea and signed on 25 July 1865 a death certificate which he sent to Sir J. B. Gibson, Director-General, Army Medical Department, reporting the death 'at 4 a.m. this morning of Inspector-General Dr James Barry'. As Dr McKinnon himself said later, he had been intimately acquainted with Dr Barry (whom he had never suspected of being a female) and could 'positively swear to the identity of the body', so that it was none of his business to do anything more about it.

It is possible that, as the press said, the doctor had promised Barry that no post-mortem examination should take place, and certainly his tactics, when confronted with later developments, were masterly. But it certainly seems careless to have allowed the body to be prepared for burial by the charwoman; and nemesis came swiftly.

Not long after Dr Barry's death, Dr McKinnon was summoned to the Charles Street office of Sir Charles McGrigor, Bart. & Co., the army agents, and was there confronted with this charwoman 'wishing to obtain some perquisites of her employment which the Lady who kept the lodging-house in which Dr Barry died had refused to give her'.

This refusal had roused the woman to wrath which she now vented on Dr McKinnon. He reports that, amongst other things, she said:

Dr Barry was a female and that I was a pretty doctor not to know this and that she would not like to be attended by me. I informed her that it was none of my business whether Dr Barry was a male or female—and that I thought it as likely he might be neither, viz an imperfectly developed man.

She then said that she had examined the body and that it was a perfect female and farther that there were marks of her



having had a child when very young. I then enquired how have you formed this conclusion? The woman pointing to the lower part of her stomach, said, 'From marks here,<sup>1</sup> I am a married woman, and the mother of nine children. I ought to know.

The woman went further, and tried a little blackmail:

She seemed to me, said Dr McKinnon, to think that she had become acquainted with a great secret and wished to be paid for keeping it. I informed her that all Dr Barry's relatives were dead and it was no secret of mine, and that my own impression was that Dr Barry was a Hermaphrodite.

Dr McKinnon must by now have been fairly pleased with himself. He had treated the woman with becoming scorn, although, as events were to prove, he had by no means silenced her, and the Horse Guards seemed to be showing no further interest in their late Inspector-General. Then, on 23 August 1865, that is to say two days after the publication of the *Manchester Guardian's* 'Strange Story', he received the following letter from the Registrar-General:

Sir,

It has been stated to me that Inspector-General Dr James Barry, who died at 14 Margaret Street on 25th July, 1865, was after his death found to be a female.

As you furnished the Certificate as to the cause of his death, I take the liberty of asking you whether what I have heard is true, and whether you yourself ascertained that he was a woman and apparently had been a mother?

Perhaps you may decline answering these questions; but I ask them not for publication but for my own information.

I have the honor to be, Sir

Your faithful Servant,

George Graham

Registrar General

<sup>1</sup> (Med. The *striae gravidarum*).



By return of post Dr McKinnon replied, giving the Registrar-General the details quoted above of the charwoman's testimony, concluding:

But whether Dr Barry was male, female, or hermaphrodite I do not know, nor had I any purpose in making the discovery, as I could positively swear to the identity of the body as being that of a person whom I had been acquainted with as Inspector-General of Hospitals for a period of 8 or 9 years.

The Registrar-General left the matter at that; even if he had considered a post-mortem desirable it was too late then, a month after Barry's burial. And so, after all, it is the charwoman who has the last word, and the best evidence.

It is not known who received the perquisites that the charwoman had so much desired, but it is said that on the day after Dr Barry's death 'a nobleman's valet came for the little dog; settled accounts with Black John, even to giving him the return passage money to the island whence he came'. This story is confirmed by Mr McCrindle in his letter to the *Glasgow Herald*, where he says that after Dr Barry's death 'his body servant, a black soldier, called at my parents' house (at Kingston) and told them that a footman in livery called at the hotel and took away the black box which the doctor showed my father'.

So ended a life dedicated to Medicine and to the amelioration of human suffering. Poor Dr Barry! Her last wishes had been disregarded and the secret of her sex revealed, but the mystery of her birth—and of her child—went with her to her grave in Kensal Green.



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## *The Author*

Isobel Rae was born in 1902 of Scottish parents. She was educated at St. Leonard's School, St. Andrew's and Girton College, Cambridge (where she took her French Tripos in 1923 and English Tripos in 1924).

Between the two wars she did social work in London, and from 1939-46 was County Secretary for Nairnshire in the British Red Cross Society. In 1946 Miss Rae decided to live permanently in Nairn, and took up journalism seriously, writing mainly for Scottish newspapers and magazines. Her first broadcast was made in 1949, and since then she has given several talks on Woman's Hour and Children's Hour.

Miss Rae won the John Walker Trophy of the Society of Women Journalists in 1949 for a feature article. *The Strange Story of Dr. James Barry* is her first book.



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